

ANXIOUS FOR THE FRAY:
BUILDING COMMUNITY AND FIGHTING ADDICTIONS IN A
RURAL CHURCH CONTEXT

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*Dedicated to the brothers and sisters in Christ
at Poplar Ridge Friends Church*

Philippians 1:3-6

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
ABSTRACT	5
CHAPTERS	
1. The Problem and its Setting	6
Poplar Ridge Friends Church	6
Thesis	7
Methodology	8
Poplar Ridge Friends Church and Our Community	9
The Complicated Question of Poverty	13
Toward a Definition of Poverty	14
Poverty as Brokenness	15
Categorizing Poverty as Brokenness	17
Thesis-Project Goals	20
Poverty in Rural America	22
Mountain View Mobile Home Park	24
The Complexities of Rural Poverty	25
Generational Poverty	25
Fragile Family and Social Networks	27
Isolation	28
Drug Addiction	29
Transportation	30
Rural Poverty: A Narrative Example	32
The Effects of Rural Poverty	35
Conclusion	37

2. Theological Basis	37
Do we see the rural poor?	42
Theological Basis	45
Defining “Rural Poor”	46
Sin: The Cause of Poverty	48
Poverty as Broken Relationships	50
Four Key Relationships	51
Four Broken Relationships in our Rural Community	54
God of the Poor	58
Poor and Poverty: A Word Study	59
The Over-Spiritualization of Poverty	62
Poverty in Scripture: A Brief Survey	64
The Incarnation	70
God of the Rural Poor	72
Conclusion	77
3. Literature Review	78
Development for the Global Poor	83
Ministry in Rural Congregations	89
Resources for the Local Church	97
Resources for Personal Development	107
Books about the Rural Poor in America	108
Conclusion	114
4. Project Design	116
Disrupting the Process of Poverty	117
Laying the Foundation for Outreach	119
Know, Trust, Love: A Guiding Philosophy	120
Meeting Our Community	121

From Isolation to Community - The Free Community Meal	125
Hope Dealers - Celebrate Recovery	127
Research Methods	131
5. Outcomes	133
The Community Meal - Common Themes	133
Celebrate Recovery - Common Themes	138
An Important Caveat	142
Narrative	143
Conclusion	145
6. Recommendations	147
Six Considerations	148
Conclusion	154
APPENDIX	156
Interview Questions	156
Participant Interview Dates	157
BIBLIOGRAPHY	158
VITA	163

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2017 Poplar Ridge Friends Church, a congregation in rural Randolph County, North Carolina, began two ministries with the hope of reaching their community. The Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery began with two important goals in mind: build community and help people fight drug addiction. This thesis-project is the observation of these programs and their affects on the participants. The rural setting of Poplar Ridge offers tremendous opportunity to reach people who are “on the fray” of society. These are people who do not have opportunities for social engagement or resources to fight the opioid epidemic prevalent in their community. This thesis-project outlines the theological basis for these programs by offering a summary of the Biblical narrative of God’s care for the rural poor. A literature review reveals plentiful resources concerning community development, poverty and rural American, though there are scant resources that specifically address Christian outreach to the rural poor. The project design portion of this thesis-project offers a narrative account of the two programs and the means by which qualitative data was collected to assess the affects of the participants. Part five reveals these affects by summarizing the interviews of those who participated. Finally, part six is a set of recommendations for a rural congregation considering outreach to their community.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM IN ITS SETTING

Poplar Ridge Friends Church

Poplar Ridge Friends Church sits in the heart of the Piedmont region of rural Randolph County, North Carolina.¹ Quakers have been meeting in this location for well over a century. I was born and raised in this area, and it is a special privilege to serve as Senior Pastor at a church so close to my roots. Our locale has some of the most beautiful scenery in the state, with thick forests, beautiful lakes, and rolling hills. Randolph County is God's country. You could stop on just about any stretch of the long, two-lane highways and take a picture of breathtaking scenery. *Our State* magazine editor Bill Sharpe said it well:

It is said of Randolph that it is one county where every road is a scenic highway. Every mile has its view. This combination of woods, of numerous streams, rolling hills swelling into mountain knobs and ridges, all interspersed by occasional savannah make Randolph an exceedingly attractive section [of the state].²

The scenery around Poplar Ridge is especially beautiful. The church sits on a two-lane road that weaves through the Caraway Mountains, a subsection of the Uwharrie Mountains that stretches half-way through the state, from Appalachia to the Piedmont region.

Just beyond these photogenic landscapes, however, lies a hidden menace: Our county is imbued with terrible poverty. Behind the thick oak and poplar leaves, on the side roads and gravel driveways, many residents in our area reside in substandard

¹ Poplar Ridge Friends Church is a part of the "Society of Friends", also known as Quakers. Hereafter, the term "Friend's" applies to Quakers and their ministries.

² L. McKay Whatley. *Randolph County: Images of America* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 9.

housing, struggle with drug addictions and live in social isolation. Along the side streets that curl up the Caraway Mountains, our neighbors live in campers, trailers, and dilapidated houses. Fiercely independent, isolated, and largely forgotten, our neighbors suffer the effects of rural poverty.

Systemic, entrenched rural poverty is the culmination of a variety of factors. Our neighbors suffer from economic brokenness, substance abuse, lack of education, generational poverty, and food insecurity. Social isolation, which includes a dearth of meaningful friendships and weak family structures, only exacerbates the problems. Poverty is not simply a dearth of material resources, although that is certainly a factor. People are born poor, become poor, and remain poor for innumerable reasons, and, in turn, there are no simple answers to rural poverty. The rural context exacerbates the problem as the rural poor are farther from community resources and charitable organizations that can help.

Thesis

This thesis will describe how Poplar Ridge Friends Church crafted and implemented two intentional ministries with the hope of addressing some of the harsh effects of rural poverty in our area. Of course, the problem of poverty in our area cannot be eliminated by our church with a couple of programs, but we can address two specific problems ailing our community: drug abuse and isolation. In June 2017 Poplar Ridge began two ministries that meet once a week, on the same night: the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery. The Free Community Meal is an effort to create a social fabric for otherwise disconnected people. Celebrate Recovery is a faith-based drug-

recovery program aimed at restoring the lives of those who suffer from addiction. The aim of these programs is to see meaningful, lasting change in the lives of our neighbors. We seek to answer the question “Can a rural church implement intentional Christian ministries that help their ailing community?”

Methodology

This thesis will offer a snapshot of some of the effects of these two ministries. Several people who live in close proximity to the church have regularly participated in these ministries for a year. Many had no prior relationship with Poplar Ridge (or any church) and attended no other community activities or faith-based recovery programs. By conducting semi-structured interviews with participants and hearing their stories, I will be able to gather insights on how these ministries affected their lives.

While we have reached dozens of people in our community through outreach efforts, this project will focus on those who have regularly participated in either the Community Meal or Celebrate Recovery or both. I will define a “regular” attendee as one who has attended at least three out of four times a month over the course of 12 months. We have not kept a record of attendees at either the Free Community Meal or Celebrate Recovery, but that will not inhibit our ability to determine regulars. A faithful core of people attended (almost) without fail for the entire year! The attendance at these ministries has fluctuated over the year (Free Community Meal, between 30–80; Celebrate Recovery, between 15–30), but a solid base of individuals has remained faithful from week one. These participants have become our friends. We have been welcomed into their lives, and we have come to know their stories. Not only is this fellowship a blessing

from God but it allows us to gauge the effects of these ministries on a specific group of people. I am hopeful the interviews with participants will offer genuine insights and recurring themes that can be described in this thesis-project.

Poplar Ridge Friends Church and Our Community

Poplar Ridge Friends Church is an evangelical “programmed” Quaker church that averages approximately 200 attendees for Sunday services.³ We have a large, spacious campus that includes a sanctuary, Sunday school hall, gym, and fellowship hall. A large campus with multiple buildings allows for a variety of programs and ministries. Founded in 1865, Poplar Ridge has a long and proud history of ministry in our community.

Poplar Ridge sits among the Caraway Mountains in a sleepy township (Hillsville) about ten miles from a city center. The church is rural but not remote. A gas station, hardware store, and restaurant are approximately six miles away. A few neighborhoods have sprung up around the church in the past few decades, but for the most part, the area has never seen a population boom; the geography will not allow it. The church sits on Hoover Hill Road, which twists, turns, and winds through the Caraway Mountains and connects two of North Carolina’s manufacturing centers: High Point and Asheboro. People do not usually come to our little town; they are almost always just passing through.

The problems of poverty, isolation, and drug abuse have deep roots in our area. Our county has a history of rabble-rousing, rambunctious contrarians that have never fit the mold of polite society. Local historian L. Mackay Whatley says it well:

³ This contrast “unprogrammed” Friends who do not have a regular order of service and worship by sitting in silence until individuals are prompted to share in word or song.

Almost every one of the world's religions is, or has been, represented in the county. The same can be said of almost every party, faction, or philosophy of American political thought. Sometimes those ways of making sense of life, living, and the universe have clashed, butted heads, or even shot at each other trying to prove who is 'right.' From the War of the Regulation, to the Tory Guerrilla War of the Revolution, to abolitionism and the Underground Railroad, to the Inner Civil War, to modern party politics, the residents of Randolph County have usually taken the contrarian position on social and political issues.⁴

The county was settled by Pennsylvania Quakers in the early 1700s, when they migrated from Pennsylvania during a time of rapid and ambitious expansion of the American Friends movement.⁵ As these hills were settled, a subsection of people preferred to live farther in the brush, away from the community. The reasons for settling in the hills are unique to the individual. The oldest plot in the Poplar Ridge cemetery is a man who was accused of hiding munitions for the Rebel army in these hills during the Civil War. Local historians recount stories of people fleeing to the Caraway Mountains to avoid service in the military during that same era. Some people move into the hills to be left alone, others because they do not quite fit in to polite society. Many mountainous communities tell the same story: the upper-crust *savoir vivre* enjoy either the cosmopolitan benefits of city life or quiet country living. But just beyond the fray are those who do not quite fit the mannerisms of polite society. The gauche and unrefined make their way to the hills and live in relative seclusion.⁶

⁴ L. McKay Whatley. *Randolph County: Images of America* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 7.

⁵ Whatley. *Randolph County: Images of America*, 9.

⁶ Recent examples of this phenomenon found in non-fiction literature include: Jeannette Walls. *The Glass Castle : a Memoir*. (New York: Scribner, 2009). Nancy Isenberg. *White Trash: The 400-year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking Press, 2016). Christopher McDougall. *Born to Run: a hidden tribe, superathletes, and the greatest race the world has never seen*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

For generations, poor people have made their home in the Caraway Mountains. These hills have long been home to outsiders and ruffians. As the Randolph County population grew over the years, so too did the number of impoverished people. This triggered the county government to begin efforts to aid the poor. The Randolph County Poor House, a home for the destitute, orphaned, and helpless, was established in the 18th century at the foot of the Caraway Mountains.⁷ The County Farm project, also at the foot of the Caraway Mountains, was the first social service work undertaken by the Randolph county government. These projects, along with other ministries supported by the Quakers, Southern Methodists, Baptists, and Holiness churches, were established to ease the burden of poverty in these hills.

The impulse to help the vulnerable, especially in rural areas, has been prominent among Quakers since its inception as a Christian movement in the 17th century. The original Friends movement began in small towns in northern England and persist in many rural communities across the globe. The persecution of the early Friends from the Church of England which, as the officially sanctioned religious tradition of England, dominated the urban areas. This meant that early Friends gathered in barns, fields, and small homes outside the cities. Early Quaker luminaries like George Fox and William Penn spent much of their ministries pleading on behalf of the poor and marginalized, many of whom lived in rural places. A few generations later, John Woolman, an 18th century Quaker mystic and advocate for the impoverished, would write *A Plea for the Poor* and other

⁷ L. McKay Whatley. *Randolph County: Images of America*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 96.

influential pieces that would spur the abolition movement.⁸ Quakers have tried to stay attuned to the dilemmas of the day and to speak gospel truth and compassion into social ills. Helping the poor, especially the rural poor, is part of the Quaker DNA.

In the spring of 2016, a small group at Poplar Ridge followed in the footsteps of their Quaker forbearers. They began to pray and discern ways to confront the real issues in our community, specifically, isolation and drug abuse. As we brainstormed, we began to imagine ministries that could make a meaningful impact on our community for Christ. We gravitated toward one specific area: the Mountain View Mobile Home Park. Just two miles from the church and home to around 300 residents, the 96-lot trailer park was a good place to begin an outreach ministry. As we ventured out, we began to see how our neighbors in the trailer park are living reclusive lives and in substandard conditions. Drug abuse and its effects are rampant.

As we prayerfully considered these ministries, we discussed the depth and breadth of the problems in our area and determined that we must not be impetuous in our efforts to combat poverty. Poverty has been present since these hills were settled, and a few programs and good intentions were not going to “fix” these pervasive problems. As Jesus said, “There will always be the poor among you,”⁹ and it would be imprudent to believe that all poverty can be completely alleviated this side of heaven. However, we believe these programs can help people take meaningful steps toward healthier spiritual and

⁸ John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman and other Major Essays*, ed. Philip Moulton (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 1971).

⁹ Mark 14:7. The Holy Bible: New International Version, 1984. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New International Version*.

physical lives, which, in turn, will lead to a healthier community. We committed to serve faithfully and make the most positive impact on our ailing community.

The Complicated Question of Poverty

It is necessary to have a working understanding and definition of poverty if we are to work toward combating the troubles in our area. Poverty is more than just a lack of basic resources such as food, shelter, and clothing. Many consider poverty to be a lack of basic material goods, but the reality is far more complex. Poor people are imagined to be destitute: hungry, sick, and lacking shelter. While that may be true, it is an incomplete understanding and misses the complexities and nuances of actual poverty.

This is crucial as our definition of poverty is critical when seeking viable solutions. For instance, if we say that all poverty is a purely spiritual issue, the only answer is evangelism. Many well-meaning Christians contend that we could end poverty if only every low-income person would simply accept Jesus. This strategy is to simply share the Word of God and let the rest sort itself out. But is poverty just a spiritual issue?

What if we believe poverty is a result of unjust social systems or systemic oppression? Then the solution to poverty would be to advocate for social change. If poverty is a societal problem, then the answer is to change society. Just vote differently and push for better social policies. According to this theory, activism and social change would eliminate poverty.

If we believe poverty is a lack of resources like food and shelter, then we are going to spend our time shifting resources to people that have those needs. The answer to poverty is then a simple math problem to be solved. Just move goods from the places that

have an abundance to the places that do not, and make sure everyone is “sated and calmed.” Material reallocation via food pantries and shelters becomes the answer to the question of poverty.

In reality, poverty is not an equation to be solved. We can move materials around and give people more possessions, but that does not mean they are no longer poor. Nor can poverty be fixed by social programs either, and we should not pretend that every community in America can be a Utopia. The answer is not purely spiritual either. Many very good Christian people with deep faith still live in economic brokenness. More evangelism is always good, but it does not necessarily translate into a better way of life for the poor. So if it is not necessarily a lack of resources, spirituality, or social programs...what is poverty?

Toward a Definition of Poverty

To begin to grasp the complexities and nuances of poverty, a change of perception may be necessary. Most people understand poverty as an outward condition. Poor people are those who live in a certain way, such as homeless or hungry. However, those are only symptoms and/or effects of poverty. The cause of poverty is much deeper than a lack of material assets.

Many theories concerning poverty have emerged over the last century, each an attempt to grasp the colossal quagmire of this issue. Bryant Myers book, *Walking with the Poor: Principles of Transformational Development* is essential for anyone seeking to understand the nuance of poverty and the complications associated with implementing

workable solutions.¹⁰ The book offers helpful summaries of these theories in his classic book on the subject. Myers articulates Robert Chambers's definition of poverty as entanglement. Impoverished people are entangled in social, governmental, and cultural systems that do not allow for the flourishing of human life. Myers summarizes the work of Amartya Sen, a Pakistani economist. She contends that poverty is a lack of freedom. People will only thrive in an environment where they have the liberty to make their own choices concerning health, education, and the social and cultural encouragement of their own ambitions. In recent decades, several other theories about poverty have emerged, and each brings valuable insight to the conversation.

Poverty as Brokenness

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the definition by Bryant Myers, who articulates poverty as brokenness in vital relationships:

Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.¹¹

According to Myers, every visible manifestation of poverty is rooted in the brokenness of vital relationships. Myers thesis is that a healthy life is predicated upon a strong relationship with God, self, others, and creation. As Myers contends, every theory of

¹⁰ Bryant L Myers. *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011). Kindle Location 2704-3019.

¹¹ Bryant L Myers. *Walking with the Poor*, Kindle Location 3219-3220.

poverty “rest[s] on the foundational idea of relationships that lack justice, peace, and shalom, that work against well-being, against life and life abundant.”¹²

Therefore, poverty is not simply a matter of resource distribution. If someone does not have enough, the answer is not as simple as putting resources in the hands of the poor. Outward manifestations of poverty originate in the inward condition of the poor person. Poor people also tend to live within an environment that sustains poverty. A constant shortage of food, having few assets, and economic brokenness are the visible evidence of broken relationships.

This is why poor people who win the lottery almost always end up in poverty again.¹³ Young professional athletes can sign million-dollar contracts and go broke within a few years.¹⁴ Putting money in the hands of someone with a poor relationship with money does not remove the broken relationship that person may have with money and/or possessions, and thus they are not able to properly steward their finances. If the key relationships remain broken, the outward effects of poverty will soon follow.

One can have money and still be poor, and vice-versa. Some live on very little money and have few assets, yet their key relationships are rich and meaningful. They have no money, but they are rich! This sentiment is echoed in the ministry of Jesus, who spoke of abundant life, not as the allocation of material possessions, but the inward

¹² Myers. *Walking with the Poor*; Kindle Locations 3219-3220.

¹³ Scott Hankins, Mark Hoekstra and Paige Marta Skiba, “The Ticket to Easy Street? The Financial Consequences of Winning the Lottery,” *MIT PressJournals: The Review of Economics and Statistics* 93, no. 3 (2011): p. 961-969.

¹⁴ Pablo Torre, “How (and Why) Athletes Go Broke” *Sports Illustrated*, March 2009.

contentment of the disciple.¹⁵ In my personal interaction with the economically broken in our area, many have shown to be lacking in healthy, deep relationships with God and others.

Poverty as Brokenness

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert build on Myer's premise in their popular book, *When Helping Hurts*.¹⁶ They offer practical advice for the local church in her fight against poverty as brokenness. They categorize four vital relationships that must be healthy for a person to truly live well and out of poverty. The visible manifestations of poverty (substandard living, food insecurity, few assets, etc.) are the result of brokenness in one or more of these relationships:¹⁷

#1 - Relationship with God: To know and glorify God is the primary purpose of our existence. Spiritual satisfaction is borne in Him. Without a meaningful relationship with God through Christ His Son, we are adrift and lack purpose. This is the primary relationship that has the potential to move someone out of poverty. Governments and churches alike can provide resources and even change the environment of the impoverished, but a spiritual rebirth is the only thing that leads to lasting change.

#2 - Relationship with self: Another aspect of an abundant life is the acknowledgement that each person is "fearfully and wonderfully made."¹⁸ Every life has

¹⁵ John 10:10

¹⁶ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts: How To Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting The Poor-- And Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009).

¹⁷ Corbett and Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts*, 55.

¹⁸ Psalm 139:14

value. God knit each person in their mother's womb.¹⁹ Everyone is made for His purposes. The poor people I have encountered tend to be indifferent about the value of their lives. There is a pervading sense that life is not sacred and their lives do not have meaning. There are constant regrets about the past but no plans to make a better future. A key element to guiding someone out of poverty is to help them to realize that life has meaning; that their bodies are a sacred temple of the Holy Spirit that should be treasured. Every person, by the virtue of the fact that they are alive, has value. Poor people tend to lack confidence. Helping them claim their identity and appreciate their worth is an important step toward a flourishing life.

#3 - Relationship with others: A good life has meaningful relationships with others. Most of us take our friends, families, and communities for granted. But having a strong support system is part of the difference between poverty and abundance. The impoverished people in our area, with very few exceptions, do not have strong relationships with others. Most homes I visit in our area are rife with conflict. Almost all have children from multiple marriages or relationships, creating a slew of half-siblings and a hodgepodge of aunts, uncles, and grandparents. There is always high drama as small conflicts get tense in a hurry. While every family has its share of drama, poor people tend to have family systems that are a constant emotional drain. Part of the fight against poverty is helping people form and maintain healthy relationships where they can find support and encourage others.

¹⁹ Psalm 139:13

#4 - Relationship with creation: Another overlooked detriment of the poor is their relationship to the physical world. God made this beautiful world and called it “good.”²⁰ A healthy person realizes acknowledges value of their surroundings. There is dignity in hard work and healthy pride in property ownership. Good stewardship is highly regarded. Possessions are not to be worshipped, and we must be careful material goods do not assume control over our spiritual life. However, as we learn in the Garden of Eden, humans are called to proper care of God’s creation. To own and properly manage is an incredibly rewarding, even divine, activity. A typical trait of the poor is a lack of care for their property and surroundings. In our area, many homes are not maintained and have become dilapidated.

Poverty, in its essence, is an inward condition. The visible manifestations of poverty reveal themselves in people who are economically broken and isolated and who have no spiritual core. This definition helps us understand that poverty is more than financial hardship. A workaholic displays a broken relationship with creation. They are being poor stewards of their time and effort. They may financially prosper as a result of the long hours, but eventually this poverty will reveal itself in broken relationships among friends and family. Likewise, a selfish person may live with a sense of self-gratification, but in time, the broken relationship with others will create an untenable isolation that will result in a deeply unsatisfying life.

Unfortunately, the rural poor in our area suffer harsh consequences for their broken relationships. People who enjoy healthy social networks and strong relationships

²⁰ Genesis 1:31

with friends and family are able to survive brief lapses of judgement or seasons where they do not live in good relationships. But those who live in constant brokenness and have no social capital or strong spiritual foundations will have a more difficult time when trouble inevitably comes.

Thesis-Project Goals

As aforementioned, this thesis-project will implement and observe the effects of two intentional ministries of Poplar Ridge Friends Church from June 2017 through May 2018: the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery. Both programs address poverty through the lens of brokenness. The Free Community Meal is an attempt to help members of our community form healthy relationships with others. The rural poor suffer in isolation, and the situation is particularly bad in our area. The Free Community Meal invites people to the simple yet profound act of breaking bread with others. Sharing a meal necessitates interaction. It is our hope that this meal will create connections in a community where people are reclusive.

The implementation of Celebrate Recovery is an intentional effort to help people restore a relationship to self.²¹ In our area, the opioid epidemic is not a headline or set of statistics about some far-off place; it is a daily reality. These drugs destroy the user in the worst way. When addiction takes hold, the addict loses their identity. Basic priorities fall by the wayside. Friends and family are ignored or worse, used as enablers of their dependency. Addicts cannot hold a job, their bodies deteriorate, and life begins to flutter away. You can see the diminished countenance in the face of an addict. After just a few

²¹ www.celebraterecovery.com

months of drug abuse, the symptoms begin to reveal themselves. The addict develops a nervous twitch and an uncontrollable urge to scratch their skin. They pick at their increasingly skeletal cheeks and, with time, awful lesions dot their visage. An identity is lost. Before substance abuse, these were people with potential, with dreams and ambitions. At the very least, they had a unique identity. Opioids create a drug-induced drone whose only ambition is the next hit. Celebrate Recovery is a Christ-centered program aimed at restoring what substance abuse has fractured.

The other two areas of brokenness (with God and with creation) offered by Corbett and Fikkert are equally important. The central relationship that must be restored from brokenness is the relationship with God. All other relationships ultimately flow from our connection (or disconnection) with God. Likewise, the relationship with creation, or good stewardship, must be restored in order to live a healthy and productive life.

This thesis-project focuses on just two of the aforementioned areas of brokenness (with others and with self) for a couple of reasons. Both of these programs are evangelistic and clearly share the gospel of Jesus Christ. The main goal of all our ministries at Poplar Ridge is to evangelize the lost, and there is no genuine community or restoration of self without God in Christ. The scope of this project, however, does not allow for the implementation and evaluation of a specifically evangelistic program. Likewise, the restoration of a relationship with creation is a lifelong journey. Those who have never been taught the basics of stewardship or the importance of caring for God's provision are not going to learn it in a year-long program. Rather, to help the

impoverished develop their lives, it requires the church to come alongside, befriend, and disciple them through formal and informal interaction. That is a worthwhile endeavor, but far beyond the scope of this project.

A year of observation of the effects of the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery offers useful information about the changes in the lives of the participants. Even though we cannot craft and implement a program for each of these four areas of brokenness (God, self, others and Creation), we are hopeful these two programs will offer valuable insight into how to restore important relationships among the poor in a rural community.

Poverty in Rural America

No matter where you live in America, poverty is around the corner. According to the Center for Poverty Research at UC–Davis, 12.7% of Americans lived below the poverty line in 2016. That is roughly 42.1 million people who qualify for federal assistance because their income cannot cover the basic costs of living. The good news is that the poverty rate is near its all-time low (11.1% in 1959).²² Unfortunately, tens of millions of people in America require government programs to supplement their basic needs.

Poverty is especially harsh in rural America. When people think of poverty in America, the mind often drifts to urban ghettos and housing projects.²³ However, poverty is not just a problem in inner cities. Rather, as studies have repeatedly shown, “rural

²² Semega, Jessica L., Kayla R. Fontenot, and Melissa A. Kollar, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-259, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2017.

²³ Daman, Glenn. *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018). Kindle Edition. 96

poverty rates exceed urban poverty rates in all regions.”²⁴ Rural Americans are subject to the same terrible effects of poverty as their urban counterparts: food insecurity, crime, hopelessness, etc.

Randolph County is one of 80 counties (out of 100) in North Carolina classified as rural. The North Carolina Rural Center, a sub-department under the North Carolina Department of Commerce, defines rural as “counties with population densities of 250 people per square mile or less, according to 2014 U.S. Census population estimates. These counties are home to a little more than 4 million people (41 percent of the state population).”²⁵

Rural areas in North Carolina are hit especially hard with poverty. According to Billy Ray Hall of the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center:

More rural North Carolinians than urban residents live in poverty. With fewer employment and educational opportunities, rural people and families are more likely to get caught up in a cycle of poverty...Poverty is an especially poignant issue in rural North Carolina, where about 14 percent of the population, more than 15 percent of the elderly, and more than 18 percent of children wake up each day to poverty.²⁶

The Daily Tarheel reports, “Poverty affects state’s rural counties at higher rate than urban counties.”²⁷ The article also cites the extensive reach of rural poverty: “Rural North Carolina sees higher rates of disability and opioid addiction, as well as under-

²⁴ Litmann, Todd, Victoria Transport Institute. *Public Transit’s Impact on Rural and Small Towns: A Vital Mobility Link*. American Public Transportation Association. 2017

²⁵ N.C. Rural Economic Development Center. *N.C. Rural Center 2015 Impacts Report*, p 3.

²⁶ Billy Ray Hall, “Perspectives on Poverty in North Carolina,” *Popular Government Magazine, Special Issue*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Spring/Summer 2003, 26.

²⁷ Lauren Kent, “Poverty affects state’s rural counties at higher rate than urban counties,” *Daily Tar Heel* (Chapel Hill, NC), Apr. 26, 2017.

resourced health care infrastructures...and [rural] residents use emergency rooms as primary health care providers.”

Rural poverty is not a theory in the community surrounding Poplar Ridge Friends Church; it is right around the corner. When we ventured into our community, we saw the effects of rural poverty in a nearby mobile home park.

Mountain View Mobile Home Park

The two programs described in this thesis-project were open to everyone in our church and community, but we targeted our outreach in one specific area: Mountain View Mobile Home Park. This 96-lot trailer park is home to approximately 300 residents and sits just two miles from the Poplar Ridge Friends Church. Also known as “Jordan Valley” (after the road on which the park sits), Mountain View has a negative reputation in our community for rough characters, violence, and drug use. The park is reputed to be home to drug dealers, transients, and petty criminals.

The trailer park is an American phenomenon that emerged in the post-World War II housing boom. Manufactured homes (the technical name for a trailer) were the original starter house as an inexpensive but sturdy dwelling for people getting their financial footing. However, with each passing generation, the trailer park became less about opportunity. Renting a lot is (relatively) inexpensive and is the only space lower income people can afford. Trailer parks have thus become the bottom rung of the housing ladder.

There are no shortage of stereotypes about those who live in trailer parks. While movies and TV tend to dramatize and even romanticize the urban ghetto, the rural poor are characterized as rubes and “white trash” in shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*

and *The Trailer Park Boys*. Research indicates that living in a trailer park can have a negative impact on the psyche and decision making of the tenants.²⁸ Living in a depressed environment, whether an urban ghetto or a rural trailer park, has the same effects on residents. A sense of hopelessness and malaise permeates impoverished communities.

The Complexities of Rural Poverty

As we have seen, the issue of poverty is quite complex, but poverty in a rural setting adds even more obstacles. The common perception of rural America is usually positive. Beautiful, quiet, pastoral scenes fill the imagination. Scenes from *The Andy Griffith Show* may come to mind, where the slower, gentler sensibilities of rural folks are prized over those of their fast-paced urban counterparts. People imagine rural settings where roosters crow, Granddaddy offers solemn wisdom, everyone knows their neighbors, and going to church is the central activity. But the rural setting around Poplar Ridge Friends Church is no Mayberry.

Generational Poverty

Generational poverty means that individuals and families are poor from one generation to the next. The poor underclass has a long, sad legacy in North Carolina. By the early 1700s, North Carolina had already “forged a lasting legacy of what we might call the first white trash colony.”²⁹ The early upper-class colonizers deemed large swaths

²⁸ Sonya Alamon. *Singlewide: Chasing the American Dream in a Rural Trailer Park* (Cornell University Press, 2017), Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 158.

²⁹ Nancy Isenberg. *White Trash: The 400-year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 47. “sinke” is an old English expression referring to the dregs of society.

of poor, white, mostly Scottish settlers as the “sinke of America.”³⁰ Those who did not (or would not) comply with the emerging social norms and the rigors of the Protestant work ethic were called “useless lubbers.”³¹ The poverty in rural Randolph County is as old as the Tar Heel State. Sadly, many of the residents of the Mountain View Mobile Home park are generationally poor. Of course, every situation is different, and not everyone who lives in the mobile home park has a life in shambles. Some houses are well-kept, and the owners are good stewards. Most, however, suffer from economic brokenness, and the trailer is the only roof over their head they can afford. They were raised in similarly poor living conditions, such as dilapidated houses, campers or another trailer park. Without some sort of intervention, it is likely the children in the park will continue this life of poverty into the next generation.

Cornell sociologist Sonya Salamon notes the optimal conditions for raising children in a rural area: “Low population turnover, actively engaged parents, intergenerational connections, and the overlap of school, church, and civic organization... are all community traits important to children’s well-being.”³² Unfortunately, the kids who grow up in a mobile home park are not likely to experience this ideal upbringing. Even the term “mobile home” itself implies a transient lifestyle. Many children in our area will not be privy to the deep social roots that can enable a healthy life.

³⁰ Nancy Isenberg. *White Trash: The 400-year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 47.

³¹ Isenberg, “*White Trash*,” 47.

³² Sonya Salamon. *Singlewide: Chasing the American Dream in a Rural Trailer Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017). Kindle Locations 184-185).

Almost all of the economically broken people we have encountered in our community depend on some sort of government assistance. It is important to have a social safety net, and the richest country in the world should never allow anyone to go hungry. However, there are unintended consequences of a lifetime of government entitlements. Long-term government assistance can have a deteriorating effect on the recipient.³³ When the assistance becomes the primary source of income, it creates an unhealthy system of dependency. A steady government check means that the poor no longer have to look for work or find creative solutions to their financial concerns. There is no impetus to be thrifty. They do not look to friends or family for support, nor do they have to be of assistance to anyone else. This can result in an unhealthy idleness and stymie social mobility. Reliance on government assistance can contribute to generational poverty. A terrible cycle ensues in which each subsequent generation fails to aspire beyond subsistence living.

Fragile Family and Social Networks

Other complexities of rural poverty are weak families and small social networks. Poor relationships and unhealthy families are both a symptom and a cause of rural poverty. Few people in the mobile home park have supportive relationships. It is common to hear of small disputes among neighbors that turn into longstanding feuds or even fistfights. Folks do not befriend their neighbors because of a lack of social skills, suspicion, or the transitory nature of mobile home residents. In general, residents of the Mountain View Mobile Home Park keep their social circles small. Nearly everyone in

³³ Gordon B. Dahl, Andreas Ravndal Kostol, and Magne Mogstad. "Family Welfare Cultures". *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 19237*, July 2013, Revised June 2014.

that community that we have met either lives in isolation or is surrounded by people who make bad choices. Only one of the homes we have witnessed has a nuclear family. Most homes are conglomerations of children by multiple relationships. With more dads and moms comes more in-laws, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Each home has a similarly complicated dynamic. More often than not, the family structure is more of a drain than a fountain of support.

Isolation

The Caraway Mountains have long been home to people who want to disappear. The earliest settlers noted how the trails used by Native Americans would disappear into the woods, making it very difficult to find their trading partners. During the Civil War, would-be soldiers would escape to these hills to avoid conscription. Once a year, the Army Special Forces uses the Caraway Mountains for a training exercise teaching troops how to stay hidden and avoid capture in thick forest.³⁴ People live here because they, consciously or subconsciously, want to be left alone.

While there is nothing wrong with seeking a private life, the residual effects of living in a place like the Caraway Mountains can lead to a harmful social isolation. Rural people live far from city life and all her conveniences. That means there are fewer resources and opportunities for social networking. There are fewer gathering spaces and community events and thus fewer opportunities to create social bonds. Research has shown how social isolation can cause physical harm to the body: “The feeling of loneliness, or a person’s perception of being isolated, has been linked to higher blood

³⁴ Mark Price, “Trinity neighbors in the middle of ‘Robin Sage’ gunfire, explosives,” Fox 8 News (High Point, NC) Oct. 24, 2012.

pressure and cognitive decline. Taken together, social isolation and loneliness were associated with a 29 percent increased risk for coronary heart disease and a 32 percent increased risk for stroke.”³⁵ Social isolation is an ongoing problem in our area as Hillsville residents have a paucity of communal activities. Like so many rural communities, we have no sports leagues, parks, or other typical arenas for building relationships.

Drug Addiction

According to the Center for Disease Control, annual deaths due to overdoses have increased four-fold since 2000.³⁶ A drug epidemic has been creeping over our nation for nearly a generation, and the problem is especially bad in rural communities. The distance to medical centers and rehab facilities prohibits the rural poor from regular visits. In turn, doctors may prescribe opioids for pain management rather than ongoing, in-person therapy. Another contribution to the opioid epidemic is the type of employment available to rural people (mining, farming, manufacturing, etc.). These high-risk jobs have a greater risk for injury, which may lead to drug abuse to dull the pain.

Randolph County was once a haunt for bootleggers. With the prohibition of alcohol, local furtive entrepreneurs souped up their cars to outrun law enforcement. After prohibition, once drivers did not have to outrun the law, they began to compete with one

³⁵ Valtorta NK, Kanaan M, Gilbody S, et al, “Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies,” *Heart*. Published Online: 18 April 2016. doi: 10.1136/heartjnl-2015-308790

³⁶ Luke Runyon, “Why Is The Opioid Epidemic Hitting Rural America Especially Hard?,” NPR Illinois, Jan. 4, 2017. <http://nprillinois.org/post/why-opioid-epidemic-hitting-rural-america-especially-hard#stream/0>

another. NASCAR racing was borne out of the red dirt of Randolph County and continues to this day at the Caraway Speedway.

The modern curse is not going to be romanticized like the early bootleggers. Around 1970 “marijuana, cocaine, and fraudulently obtained prescription drugs far overshadowed the old traditional vices of bootlegging and gambling.”³⁷ Randolph County went from hard drinking and racing to finding itself neck deep in the opioid epidemic. Once upon a time, rural folks were hard-drinking, rambunctious rebel rousers. A night of trouble entailed shooting stop signs and a bare knuckle brawl. But modern vice is sinister. Meth, cocaine, and prescription drugs do not make for a fun weekend. They destroy the user and corrode the community.

Every person we have met in the Mountain View Mobile Home Park has been affected by drugs. Either they are on drugs, know a relative or friend on drugs, or have had property stolen because someone (likely) needs to pay for their next hit.

Transportation

Transportation is a burden in rural America. The travel is longer, and the burden of travel is great. Urban areas have amenities within walking distance: grocery stores, hospitals, food pantries, etc. But acquiring necessities is a real challenge for rural populations. Basic travel requires longer drives, which creates more wear and tear on vehicles. A report from the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) reports the challenges to rural drivers: “Rural residents drive more miles than urban residents. Overall, rural residents travel about 33 percent more, rural workers travel 38

³⁷ L. McKay Whatley. *Randolph County: Images of America* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 99.

percent more, and lower-income rural workers drive 59 percent more annual miles than their urban peers.”³⁸

More miles on the road means a higher cost for the simple act of transportation. The cost-burden quickly adds up. Again from the CTAA: “Because of lower average incomes and higher vehicle mileage, rural households spend a much greater portion of their budgets on transportation than urban households. In 2013, rural households devoted 20 percent of their total budget to transport which is 7 percentage points more than urban households. Rural households also spend 1.8 percentage points more of their budget on fuel than urban households.”³⁹

The additional mileage creates more costs for fuel and service to cars. Price fluctuations in fuel can even determine whether or not someone can afford to drive to work. For rural people living on a razor-thin budget, transportation is always a source of anxiety. Many in the Mountain View Mobile Home Park live without reliable transportation. Cars sit idle, with the owners unable to afford a new battery or alternator or to replace a broken belt.

Randolph County offers a bus service (R.C.A.T.S. - Regional Coordinated Area Transportation System) available to every resident. However, riders must reserve a seat on the bus two days in advance and pay a fee for each ride. Including all the stops, a trip to and from the grocery store can take eight hours. A vehicle in good working order is more than a means of mobility; it represents independence, freedom, and opportunity.

³⁸ Todd Litmann, “Public Transit’s Impact on Rural and Small Towns: A Vital Mobility Link” (Victoria Transport Institute, Washington, DC, 2017), 14.

³⁹ Litmann, 15.

However, to many in rural communities, a car is simply unaffordable. The simple pleasure of transportation is taken for granted by many, but to someone living in the outskirts, a reliable vehicle is the fine line between financial stability and poverty.

Rural Poverty: A Narrative Example

It is easy to get lost in the statistics and numerical data about poverty. These numbers are useful, but they do not put a human face on the plight of rural America. Hearing a story of a real person who struggles with the effects of rural poverty offers a glimpse into the hardships faced by folks in our rural community. As you'll see in the following narrative, issues about broken relationships, transportation, weak family units, etc., are not theoretical ideas but real challenges to a full and meaningful life.

Meet Annie

Annie is a 51-year-old single woman who lives in the countryside, about four miles from Poplar Ridge Friends Church.⁴⁰ I came into contact with Annie because a friend of mine who works in real estate. My friend was waiting in court to see a Randolph county judge about another (real estate) matter. While waiting my friend heard Annie's story as she spoke to the judge.

Annie was about to be sentenced to ninety days in county jail. Her property had hundreds of pounds of household garbage scattered over the acre lot. Hundreds of bags of waste had been tossed in the yard over several years. Several burn piles dotted the property along with shattered beer bottles, bent cans, half-melted milk jugs, magazines, and all manner of refuse. Household garbage was strewn in every direction, and weeds

⁴⁰ This thesis includes narrative accounts. Names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

were growing over the trash piles. Complaints came in from neighbors, and the county sent inspectors. They levied fines to no avail and finally called Annie to court. She missed the deadline to pick up the trash. She stood before the judge in tears and awaited her sentence: ninety days in county lockup.

As Annie wept, she told the judge about the myriad of problems in her life. She has fibromyalgia, which means it was impossible for her to do any heavy lifting. Working part time at Cracker Barrel was all her body could handle. It was hard enough to make ends meet; she certainly did not have the money to pay for anyone to clean the yard. Annie did not have a truck to haul the garbage. She explained to the judge that she had tried to fill up the trunk of her car with trash. It was no use but she was out of options and out of time.

Annie went on to explain to the judge, it was actually her brother who lived on the property. He was the one who had made the mess. He was a heroin addict and did not take care of himself or the property. Annie's brother (Chuck) lived in a plywood shack on the lot. It had no air conditioning, insulation, electricity, or running water. Chuck was not concerned about the living conditions; his only priority was getting high. Annie's plea made no difference to the county lawyer who had brought her up on public nuisance charges, stating that it was Annie who owned the property and it was her responsibility.

The judge listened intently to the lawyer and heard Annie's plea. Undoubtedly, the judge had heard many stories about the repercussions of drug abuse. Setting aside the letter of the law, the judge had mercy on Annie. She had two weeks to get her property

cleaned up, but that was it. This was the last straw. If Annie came before the judge again, she would serve time.

During the court recess, my friend found Annie and told her to call me, which she did a few minutes later. When we spoke on the phone, Annie was elated about the possibility of our church helping her. Even though I gave no guarantees, our short conversation gave her a glimmer of hope. She was on her way to jail even though she had no criminal history, not even a traffic ticket. She would later tell me that our conversation was all that kept her from sinking into depression.

Annie gave me the address, and the next day, I took a friend from church to the property. Although I was familiar with the long, winding road, the property was hard to find. Entering the gravel driveway with tall unkempt shrubs on both sides, we saw the piles of household garbage and ash stacked waist high. Chuck had tried to burn the trash over the years, but that just made a bigger mess. We stood surrounded by scraps of plastic bags, sleeping bag cotton, milk jugs, empty toilet paper rolls, cereal boxes, and tin cans. Trash was up to our ankles. A short walk revealed piles of empty whipped cream cans. I would later learn drug addicts call these “whippets.” Addicts break the nozzle and then suck the nitrous gas for a quick high.

My friend and I spent about 15 minutes assessing the situation and brainstormed about how to remove the trash. We decided to use his tractor to load the garbage and another friend’s trailer to haul it off. It was a simple plan, but this was a simple project: clean up the trash and keep Annie out of jail.

A few days later, my friend rode his tractor from his farm to the site. That same day, we scheduled the trailer to be on site. Utilizing the bucket on the tractor, we went from pile to pile, scooping up the garbage and putting it into the trash trailer. Another volunteer and I would follow the tractor to pick up the pieces that were too small for the tractor's bucket. Annie stood nearby, giving us trash bags and picking up pieces in hard-to-reach areas. In about three hours, the entire property had been scraped clean. We called the county inspector to return to the property to see the removal of the trash. When he came, he took one glance and dropped all the charges. Annie was at peace, and the county moved on to other offenders.

The Effects of Rural Poverty

Annie's story offers insights into the real-world problems of rural people who live below the poverty line. In this short narrative, we see issues of generational poverty, weak family structures, and transportation issues. Further, and more importantly, we see the root of Annie's poverty. The four key relationships are strained or broken.

Annie had no meaningful relationship with God. Although she occasionally went to church as a child and had knowledge of the gospel, she claimed no ongoing relationship with Jesus. When I spoke to her about my motivation for helping her (to live and love like Jesus), she began to weep. This simple understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus provided a little bit of hope where there was none. Annie was living in spiritual darkness, without any hope for this life or the one after. Without a spiritual footing, it was impossible for her to rebuild her life. (Annie has since renewed her faith in Christ!)

Annie did not have a good relationship with herself. She lacked the basic confidence and wherewithal to confront her drug-addicted brother, and she was set to take the punishment for his crimes. Ninety days of her life were going to be spent in prison because she lacked the gumption to stand up to her brother. This lack of confidence and self-valuation also meant that Annie did not look for meaningful, long-term employment. In turn, this means she had no social mobility and was stuck in her economic status...and the cycle continued. These are the effects of a poor relationship with self.

Annie had no meaningful relationships with others. She had no one to help her. On the other hand, my friend and I were able to put our heads together, come up with a plan, and connect to a few other people in just a matter of minutes. Because of our relationship with one another and with others in our community, we were able to clean up the mess in one afternoon. Annie did not know anyone with any equipment, even though every other person in Randolph County owns a tractor. She had no relationship with friends or neighbors to get help. She did not have family members to call. Part of her poverty stemmed from a lack of meaningful relationships.

Finally, Annie did not have a strong relationship with creation. She owned no substantial property and rented a dilapidated house. Her housing situation was not as dire as her brother's, but it was still substandard. Sheets cover broken windows, and a glut of knick-knacks are stacked on shelves. It was not squalor, but it was cluttered wall to wall. A basic lack of organizational competence pervades the poor in our area. Again, poverty

in America is rarely about a lack of food or shelter. It is about a poor relationship to property, which can lead to a nasty array of clutter.

Annie is a good-hearted woman, and I now count her as a friend. I do not mean to sound condescending in any way. But Annie would admit that her life is a mess. Her story is a microcosm of the impoverished people in our community whom I have come to know and love. These are people who do not live well and have little, if any, hope that things are going to get better.

Again, the question becomes: Can our church have a meaningful, mature response to the question of poverty in our area? Can we implement intentional ministries to help people like Annie? Most people feel overwhelmed by the incredible task of combating poverty. Like Annie and her yard, we are overwhelmed by the mess, and our efforts (better church programs, better preaching, etc.) are only cleaning up the mess one trash bag at a time. The rural church can (and should!) be a resource for those living in rural poverty.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the issue of poverty is not simple. Being poor is less about a lack of material goods and more about broken relationships. Helping people mend those relationships in a rural setting is replete with obstacles. Isolation, drug addiction, lack of adequate transportation, malaise, generational poverty, and a host of other issues stand in the way of a rich, meaningful life for folks in our rural community. Despite these challenges, Poplar Ridge Friends Church has a vision to make lasting change in the lives of our neighbors. This thesis will explain how our church crafted and implemented

programs directed at restoring broken relationships in our community and, with God's help, offering opportunities for a better life.

CHAPTER TWO: THEOLOGICAL BASIS

“Do you see this woman?”¹

It was absurd question from Jesus; of course everyone saw this woman. She barged to a dinner gathering and humiliated herself. This woman of ill-repute (to put it politely) came uninvited into Simon’s home and interrupted the Pharisee’s meal with Jesus and his disciples. As if her unwelcome intrusion was not boorish enough, she proceeded to shame herself by slinking on the dusty floor. Sobbing and slobbering, she washed the feet of Jesus with her tears. An awkward silence fell on the dinner guests. Just moments before, they were engaged in deep theological conversation about the Law. Now they were watching a woman dribble in sorrow on the floor in front of the Rabbi Jesus.

As the intruder poured perfume at His feet, we imagine a frozen silence. What were the party goers supposed to do? Do they help her to her feet? Do they invite her to dine? Do they politely help her back outside?

Before anyone could act, Simon the host and master of the banquet blurted what he surely thought was a heroic declaration:

If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.²

¹ Luke 7:36-50

² Luke 7.39

Simon, sly and opportunistic, seizes the moment. He had a dual motive in this statement. First, he could stop the awkward blathering from the neighborhood strumpet. This woman obviously “lived a sinful life”³ and this was no place for her theatrics.

It was Simon’s second motive that he was most interested. He wanted to know more about this Jesus character. People said he was a prophet. If true, that means he has a special calling to holiness and he cannot allow “sinful” people to touch his flesh. Simon was trying to bind Jesus in a moral quagmire: If Jesus rejects the woman then he may say he’s a prophet, but he’ll come across as dispassionate. But if he accepts the woman’s repentance, that means he cannot be touched by her. Jesus, not Simon, will have to ask her to leave. Simon put the theological conundrum to Jesus.

Fulton Sheen illuminates Simon’s motives:

In Simon’s eyes she was a sinner and would always be accounted a sinner. To him there was abomination in her touch, sin in her tears and a lie in her ointment. The Pharisees made no inquiries, indulged in no hopes. It was all one to him whether it was depraved will, vanity, starvation or the lusts of men that drove her to ruin.⁴

But Jesus rejected the premise of Simon’s riddle. The Rabbi was not interested in solving a theological puzzle. This was not about religious laws or criteria for being a prophet. Jesus uses this awkward situation as a teaching moment. He answers in a parable to teach about God’s forgiveness to:

Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?

³ Luke 7:37

⁴ Fulton Sheen, *Life of Christ* (New York: Double Day Publishing, 1990), 122.

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.
‘You have judged correctly,’ Jesus said.⁵

As the lightbulb came on for Simon, he surely became sullen. Of course, it’s the person who has more debt that enjoys forgiveness. Even before the parable, Simon should have understood that this woman has a great debt before God and therefore she would, all at once, be more sorrowful in sin and elated in forgiveness.

As Simon is pondering his oversight and feeling the weight of shame, Jesus drives the point home by asking the question: “*Do you see this woman?*”⁶ It is as if Jesus is saying, “*Look at her Simon. See her. She is not a character in your moral stage play. She is a person, with a soul. She has a story; a past and a future. You call her as ‘sinful’ but there is more to her. Do you see her?*”

As Simon is looking at her, Jesus tells him that it was she who cleaned his feet; the job of a servant. She recognized him as Holy. She anointed him with her tears. Simon did not do any of that. He treated Jesus like a theological sparring partner while she treated him with reverence.

Jesus compelled Simon to look at this poor and desperate woman. Simon had to look at the hell that sin had wrought on the world. Here is a woman, guilty of sexual sins and economically poor. She must not be ignored. Of course, the Pharisee would prefer to ponder theological questions and entertain the guests. But Jesus commands Simon to look at her in all of her brokenness.

⁵ Luke 7:41-43

⁶ Luke 7:44

Do we see the rural poor?

While envisioning an outreach program for our church, Poplar Ridge Friends, we were confronted with the same kind of question: *Do we see the rural poor?* As Senior Pastor, it is my responsibility to make sure we are seeking to meet the actual needs within our community. As we opened our eyes to our neighbors, we found people who were desperately poor and living in the image of the “sinful woman” in Luke chapter seven. What should our church do? Continue to worship and programming as usual? Schedule more potlucks? Get the camera ready for the church selfie booth? All that is fine, but it would have neglected the actual needs in our community.

The Luke 7 woman personifies poor, oppressed and impoverished people all over the world and in our community. She is powerless, misunderstood and objectified by her peers. Our area is riddled with drug addiction, poverty and domestic violence. Our neighbors suffer in similar brokenness. Does our church really want to see that?

Congregations can unwittingly play the role of Simon. In the proverbial “home” (the church campus) they enjoy the company of invited guests; the familiar people who match in status and mannerisms. Those who “fit” are invited to the table. Churches have an unfortunate tendency towards homogeny and, as a result, they often discuss things that are important in their small circles: worship music, programming, budgets and the like. Like the scene involving Simon, Jesus is invited to fellowship. But the invitation comes with terms. Jesus is welcome in the safety of the church sanctuary, while keeping the poor and hurting people of the world at a safe distance where they remain out of sight and out of mind.

This phenomenon is nothing new. Some of the earliest accounts of the tension in Christian community between the social classes comes from the first letter to Corinthian church. In chapter 11, Paul gives counsel regarding a time of worship and fellowship in the church. The Corinthian congregation had a regular gathering, which was a time to worship, break bread and build community. In a scene depicting fickle conflicts that all too common throughout Christendom, resentment rose in the church about those who were arriving early to eat all the food prepared for dinner. Paul complains “one person remains hungry and another gets drunk”⁷. The text implies that the poorest in the church were the latecomers, perhaps because they had longer, harder working hours than their wealthier counterparts. Paul implores the church to “discern the Body”⁸ before receiving the cup and bread in worship. When gathered for worship and a meal, the church is to determine that, despite differences in class or ethnicity, they are one body sharing one loaf. This scene gives us a glimpse into the ongoing tension in Christian community between the social classes.

Of course, nobody intends to be Simon the Pharisee. No one desires to play that role. But imagine a Palm Sunday service, with the sanctuary adorned with palm branches and choir singing the cantata in beautiful robes. What would many congregations do if a prostitute were to barge in and weep at the altar? How would most churches respond to the disruption? What would the elders do? How would you act? We would all like to think that churches would play the role of Jesus and welcome the penitent sinner. But, in

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:21b

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:29

reality, there would be plenty of “Simons” in the sanctuaries. Simon did not intend to be the villain by wielding religiosity as a weapon against this woman. But he did. And so do many churches. Jesus warned against brandishing the letter of the law as a way to shame “sinners” while getting puffed up with pride in the process. At nearly every turn in His ministry Jesus warned against observance of the law without compassion.⁹ Simon, though faithful to the letter, was not sensitive to the Spirit.

Our church was challenged by Jesus’ question: *do you see this woman?* Do we care to look at the poor people who live in our community? These questions are pivotal. How a congregation relates to the poor determines whether or not they are living up to the Biblical vision for God’s people. Glenn Damon says it well:

The church needs to take the initiative and the lead in rural communities to help people who are facing the personal crisis of poverty. The greatest error is not in the misguided attempts to help, but in not doing anything at all.¹⁰

The scriptures reveal a God who cares deeply for the poor and oppressed. It is a central aspect of His character. If the parts of scripture where God expresses His care for the poor were removed, it would be a very thin Bible. Yet churches tend to focus on metrics that do not pass a Biblical test: church size, worship experience, budgets, facilities, etc. Care for the poor tends to get relegated to Christmas gifts sent around the world or a one-off food drive for the local pantry. These activities are not wrong, but they

⁹ Matthew 15:8, Matthew 23:27-28, Luke 11:44

¹⁰ Glenn Damon, *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017), 110.

hardly express a person-to-person concern for the poor that Jesus impresses upon his followers.

If the church is the Body of Christ, the Incarnate expression of Jesus' activity in the world, then congregations would naturally lean toward ministry that reflects his heart for the broken and poor. Christians ought to share the desires of God in Christ, not just in worship but in building His "...kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven"¹¹. This must include a desire from the church to personally know, serve and enable the impoverished in its community. As we will see, God cares deeply for the poor and the onus is on His church to enact His love and care for those who are most the most vulnerable.

Theological Basis

The church is implored to turn its eyes to their plight, just as Jesus insisted that Simon look upon the sinful woman. Yet the American rural poor are overlooked in many theological discussions. It is fashionable ecclesiastical circles to view Jesus' ministry to the poor and oppressed in modern contexts. Liberation theologians have filled tomes arguing that God favors specific people groups: African Americans, Latin Americans, women, homosexuals, transsexuals, etc. According to these theologians, the unjust oppression of Jesus automatically translates into His special commiseration with modern-day oppressed people-groups. Though creative, the merits of these theological appropriations are debatable. But in all of that discussion, the lack of consideration for the American rural poor is telling. They are not a people that theologians have considered worthy of relating to Jesus and His ministry.

¹¹ Matthew 6:10

Several evangelical theological resources have emerged in recent decades to speak to the problems of poverty through an intellectual lens. Most of these pieces (many of which are identified in the next section of this thesis) address the needs of the impoverished, especially the global poor who eke out an existence in substandard conditions. Further, the struggles of the American urban poor are given ample and meaningful reflection. Several books have been published about racial reconciliation, community development and the need for the church to focus her efforts on poverty alleviation around the world. But there are no books by any major Christian publishers dedicated solely to the topic of either evangelism, outreach or Christian-based development of the American rural poor. There are helpful books that deal with ministry in rural settings, but they feed into stereotypical tropes about how rural people are farmers or mill workers. There are even “cowboy churches” for folks who live and work with livestock or enjoy a good rodeo. Though helpful, none of these resources speak to the condition of the desperately poor who live well beyond the convenience of city life or the comfort of suburban enclaves.

Defining the “Rural Poor”

It is helpful to clarify an understanding of “the rural poor.” Poplar Ridge Friends Church sits in a rural area; the low-lying Caraway mountains of North Carolina. Several towns sit outside these mountains, about ten miles in any direction from our church. Settled within these hills are people we have come to know and love. They are honest, fiercely independent and too often, desperately poor. They live in trailer parks, campers and (in some cases) homes that should be condemned. Many live with food insecurity,

domestic violence and drug addiction. There is a tendency to romanticize rural life as slow, quiet and peaceful. When we think of rural poverty, most think of farmers who may be down on their luck or a small town that is ravaged after the mill closes. While that dynamic exists in many American communities, it is not a reflection of our area.

The rural poor in our area are on a lower social rung. These folks are not down-on-their luck or discouraged because they're out of work. These are people who have been called trailer trash, rednecks and deplorable. These rural poor may have never worked steady, moved (or evicted) frequently and live in harsh conditions. Every home is affected by drug abuse, in one way or another. Their personal values concerning sex, money and work ethics are far removed from polite society. Nearly every mobile home in our area includes either cohabitation or a single (and thus isolated) resident. And, most unfortunately, every woman interviewed for this project has been the victim of domestic or sexual violence at some point in her life.

These folks are less like Jesus' disciples, who were eager to learn and follow. They are more like lepers, who are social outcasts who live on the fringe of society. Yet these folks are loved by God. According to Christian doctrine, Jesus died for their sins, just like He died for the poor villager in Brazil or the single mother in Detroit. The God of the poor, who defends the widow and is a father to the fatherless,¹² cares for the rural poor in our community. In this section, I contend that the God of the Bible is on the side of the poor, including the oft-neglected rural poor.

¹² Psalm 68:5-6

Sin: The Cause of Poverty

To develop a theology for the rural poor, we must grapple with the spiritual underpinnings of poverty. An outline of the root causes of poverty is necessary and will help us apply that understanding to the American rural context.

To understand God's concern for the poor, we must first understand the source of poverty. All human suffering, including poverty, stems from the sinful condition of humanity. God created a good, beautiful order in the world;¹³ one that reflected His beauty and perfection. God created humanity as a way to reflect His glory in worship.¹⁴ The purpose of humanity is, to use a familiar phrase: "...to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."¹⁵ In the Garden of Eden that God created there was equity, abundance and harmony.

But when sin entered into the world God's perfect order was broken, creating an irreconcilable contrast between God and His creation. Scripture teaches that sin is both a personal reality¹⁶ and cosmic force.¹⁷ The entire cosmos is ensnared in sin, as it "came into the world through one man and death spread to all men because all sinned."¹⁸ And as creatures born into sin,¹⁹ humanity commits sins that both offend God and hurt others;

¹³ Genesis 1:31

¹⁴ Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1, 9:6; James 3:9

¹⁵ Westminster Assembly, Douglas F. Kelly, Philip B. Rollinson, and Frederick T. Marsh. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co, 1986.

¹⁶ Galatians 5:19-21, John 8:34

¹⁷ Ephesians 6:1

¹⁸ Romans 5:12

¹⁹ Psalm 51:5

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”²⁰ God created Eden for his creation to dwell, but over time sinful humanity traded the garden for a ghetto.

Poverty, as manifest in economic brokenness, is not simply about a lack of resources. It is a reflection of the brokenness of the human condition. Every person is stricken with the effects poverty. The sinful inclination of individuals is to take more than needed, even if it means denying someone else. Hoarding possessions of no value or releasing things that are treasures are common because of the broken nature. Because humanity is out of harmony with God and His desires, the world has fallen into terrible inequity. The world of peace and rest that God created in Eden has become imbalanced, resulting in a fortunate few and masses of impoverished. The misplaced desires of humanity has created imbalance of resources that have, in turn, caused enmity and even violence between people.

John Woolmann, an 18th century Quaker mystic, reflected on poverty being “the seeds of discord:

Wealth is attended with power, by which bargains and proceedings contrary to universal righteousness are supported; and here oppression, carried on with worldly policy and order, clothes itself with the name of justice and becomes like a seed of discord in the soil; and as this spirit which wanders from the pure habitation prevails, so the seed of war swells and sprouts and grows and becomes strong, till much fruits are ripened.²¹

²⁰ Romans 3:23

²¹ John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman and other Major Essays*, ed. Philip Moulton (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 1971), 255.

Not only has sin created an imbalance, but even the good intentions of humanity to alleviate poverty are corrupted. Several stories in the gospels show the corruption of charity. In the parable of the widow's mite,²² the generous gift of a rich man is nullified by his desire to be seen and glorified for his gift. The poor woman who has hardly anything is considered more charitable.²³ In the story mentioned at the beginning of this section, all the disciples lamented the offering of the woman in Bethany when she broke an expensive jar of perfume; "*That money could have been used for the poor!*"²⁴ They had yet to learn that alleviating poverty is not just about material resources; it is a matter of the heart just as much as it is a matter of income.

Of course, this corruption of generosity is not limited to the gospels. The bribery, waste and misuse of funds by countless charitable organizations is more than enough proof that our best intentions to relieve the poor can become an exercise in futility.²⁵

Poverty as Broken Relationships

Sin has created an irreconcilable gap between God and humanity, resulting in an imbalance of His created order, poverty and violence. To make matters worse, the best efforts of poverty alleviation are often corrupted. To combat poverty in a real, meaningful way, we need to see the cause of poverty, not as simply an inequity of resources, but as a manifestation of broken relationships.

²² Mark 12:41 -44

²³ Ronald J. Kernaghan, "Mark," in *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, ed. Grant Osborne (Downers Grove, IN: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 244.

²⁴ John 12:6

²⁵ Janet Greenlee, Mary Fisher, Teresa Gordon and Elizabeth Keating. "An Investigation of Fraud in Nonprofit Organizations: Occurrences and Deterrents." *The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations Harvard University Working Paper*, no. 35 (2006).

Bryant Myers, an expert in the area of Christian based poverty alleviation,²⁶ contends that all poverty stems from a fracture in four key relationships: God and humanity, humanity to self, humanity with others, and humanity with the rest of creation.²⁷ Using this framework, we can see how the Fall as told in Genesis 2 depicts the origins of poverty. We will see how sin creates the imbalances which lead to poverty and what this means for the rural context in communities like the one surrounding Poplar Ridge Friends Church.

Four Key Relationships

Relationship with God: The disobedience of Adam and Eve caused a rift between humanity and God. Instead of enjoying the close fellowship with God in His garden, Adam and Eve were compelled to hide from their creator. The seeds of poverty are sown when humanity chooses to hide from God surrender to shame, resentment and division. The residual effect of this division is an unhealthy imbalance between the wealthy and poor. This is why gospel proclamation must be central to any social ministry. Every outward manifestation of poverty stems from the individual and their broken relationship with God. From a Christian development perspective, all poverty is a spiritual issue and no programs or government policy, no matter how well intentioned, can alleviate poverty. Tim Chester says it well: “to engage in social action without evangelism is to fail the people we profess to love.”²⁸

²⁶ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Journal of Religion* 94, no. 2 (2014): 256-258.

²⁷ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How To Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting The Poor-- And Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 55.

²⁸ Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 61.

Relationship to Self: God created man and woman “in the image of God”²⁹, which implies that humanity alone bears many of the intrinsic desires of the Divine, such as justice and love. God declared his greatest creation “good”³⁰ meaning that humanity was a proper reflection of God Himself. Apart from the rest of creation, humanity has the high calling of reflecting the image of God. But this good image is shattered and corrupted by sin. The sad effect of the sin-brokenness is that humans will search for meaning beyond their original purpose in creation. God created us to worship and enjoy Him, but sin creates a distorted sense of self that leads to unhealthy pursuits and, too often, poverty.

When humanity draws closer to God in Christ, the purpose for creation is realized. In Christ, the sense of self is restored because the believer realizes their God-given vocation: to glorify Him. Humanity was created to reflect and glorify God.³¹ The scripture implores believers to cast off the old, unrighteous ways and to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”³² This means embracing the purpose for our creation, which is to lead a life that reflects the righteousness of God in every fact of life. A healthy relationship with self means understanding that humanity was created for a purpose beyond mere survival or the collection of material assets. Humanity was created to be “fully human” with the main vocation as the glorification of God. In the 3rd century, Athanasius of Alexandria put it

²⁹ Genesis 1:27

³⁰ Genesis 1:31

³¹ Isaiah 43:21

³² Colossians 3:12

succinctly: “He [Jesus] became what we are that we might become what he is.”³³ Jesus entered the human condition, in part, to reveal God’s desire for humanity. Jesus was fully human and a model for perfect obedience to God. As humanity drifts farther from its original purpose, the greater the consequences of spiritual (and subsequently) economic brokenness.

Relationship to Others: Sin created the first rift between people. Adam and Eve, who were formed in perfect complement to one another, were at odds as soon as sin entered the picture. Adam blames Eve for the Fall, even though he is just as culpable. He then turns to God and blames Him for sending this woman. Rather than taking responsibility for his part in the sin, Adam blames his companion: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”³⁴ The peace of their compatibility has been replaced with an unbearable tension. Poverty and violence is exacerbated when people often cannot bear to stay in healthy, mutually beneficial relationships. Sin created a division among humanity and poverty is the long-term, nasty side effect.

Relationship with Creation: The Fall created an unhealthy relationship between humanity and creation. This means humanity has an imperfect and imbalanced association with the things of earth: material resources, work and care for the world. God gave Adam dominion over the Garden of Eden and told him to be a good steward. Adam would work the garden, but it would be satisfying labor. After the Fall, the ground

³³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54:3. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI. 43

³⁴ Genesis 3:12

became hard and produced thorns. Work became laborious and difficult.³⁵ The Fall caused work to become tedious. This, subsequently, leads to a poor relationship with creation. People will either work too hard or not enough and will have too much or not enough. Sin causes both workaholics, greed and unhealthy consumption as well as laziness, a lack of meaningful work and an oppressive exploitation of laborers.

Everyone suffers these broken relationships in varying degrees. And because humanity, creation and our actions are all intertwined, the net effect of sin is a broken, imbalanced world where some have much and most have a little. These four key relationships were fractured in the Garden and, by His grace, God has been working to restore humanity. The Bible is a story of God's desire to reconcile a broken world back to Himself and the good order He intended. Because He is a loving and gracious God, He is concerned with both the spiritual and physical condition of His creation. God desires a creation that adores Him and one that is healed from the residual effects of sin, like poverty and violence.

Four Broken Relationships in our Rural Community

The effects of these broken relationships are evident among the rural poor. As our church has engaged in ministry in our community, we see these theological notions about sin and its effects, not as theory, but in reality.

Fractured Relationship with God: Among the folks in the mobile home park, there is often a sad disconnect between the gospel message of salvation and the work of the church. Every person I encountered among the rural poor had already heard some form of

³⁵ Genesis 3:17-20

the message of salvation. Many claimed to have accepted Christ when they were kids, often hearing the gospel message in a Vacation Bible School. But, by their own admission, there has been no regenerative work of the Spirit. There was no discipleship and certainly no church community. Most feel shunned or judged by churches, even before stepping inside.

Initially, there was skepticism from the community about our outreach efforts. Their screen doors had been knocked on before (usually by Jehovah's Witnesses). Most thought we were just trying to get them to come to church. A few even suspected we just wanted their money in our church coffers. Somewhere along the way the message of salvation became associated as a church-growth sales pitch. The result is an entire community who live within a stone's throw from a church, know the message of salvation and yet remain far from God.

Fractured Relationship with Self: The rural poor in our area do not have a strong sense of self. Conversations with folks in the mobile home park reveal a lack of ambition or optimism about the future. There is no talk of upward mobility or improving their situation. Of course, there is nothing wrong with living in a mobile home. Some people make that conscious decision based on their income. It can be a wise financial decision. But almost everyone we encountered in nearby mobile home parks have never considered leaving (unless evicted) or upgrading their living situation. Most were raised in similar conditions and do not have the hope or ambition to go on to anything else.

At our best, Christians are a hopeful, optimistic people. Jesus-followers have a “hope in glory”³⁶ even in the worst situations. But a fractured sense of self leaves means there is no optimism about a better future. There is no desire to stretch into personal potential. Without a sense of self, people are bound to our current circumstances. This is all-too prevalent in the trailer park.

A source of this brokenness in our rural community is drug addiction. Drugs not only wreck the body, they destroy the identity of the user. The drug addict no longer has their own identity; they belong to the addiction. Every person we encountered in the mobile home park is affected by drug addiction or opioid abuse. The addictions range from alcohol to heroine and everything in between. Residents have a relative on drugs, have had something stolen or they are addicts themselves. Most look much older than their actual age. Scars, tattoos, missing teeth and obesity are commonplace. But these are all external effects of an inward affliction. Drug use and addiction is a symptom of a greater problem. Many of our friends in the trailer park who were (or are) drug addicts admit they started using because they had nothing better to do. There was no spiritual core or sense of self that would have deterred drug use.

A fractured identity creates a longing in the heart that cannot be satisfied by material possessions, and certainly not by drug abuse. In an attempt to meet that spiritual longing, sinful humanity will feed the craving with consumerism, approval from others or any number of vices. Most of society can cloak this longing and engage in spiritually destructive behavior with little repercussion. Who is really going to notice if we spend a

³⁶ Colossians 1:27

little too much on Amazon or watch a little too much Netflix to fill a spiritual void? But among the rural poor, these longings can be filled with more destructive behavior. A longing for God is often masked with drug abuse or other destructive behaviors.

Fractured Relationship Others: Sin causes enmity with God and, unfortunately, tension with others. I was stunned to see the isolation and disconnect in our rural community. When we had a cookout in the mobile home park, folks mostly stood around like it was a middle school dance. Neighbors who had lived beside each other for years had never met. There is much to be said about the fierce independence of rural people. But this is not proud self-reliance and independence. There was (and still is) an extreme disconnect among neighbors in our community.

I have become friends with my neighbors in every neighborhood I have ever lived. We check in on each other and borrow sugar from time to time. Imagine living surrounded by people you would never meet or intend to meet. Such is the reality for the rural poor. There is no social gathering or network of friends. Most extended families are of little social help because they live in the same sort of scenario. There is almost always tension in the home. Most of the couples I have met in the trailer park are unmarried. Children are picked up and dropped off by biological moms and dads. Aunts and uncles and step-dads and ex-boyfriends come in and out. The constant flow of tension makes stable relationships nearly impossible. Many have stayed in relationships that are either neglectful or abusive simply because they see no other option. That is just the way of life.

Fractured Relationship with Creation: The Fall resulted in a marred relationship with Creation. Instead of work being a joyful, satisfying experience, it became difficult and

laborious. The ground was cursed, and thorns sprouted. This symbolizes the toil of physical labor. There was work and productivity before the Fall as Adam was commanded to tend and steward the Garden.³⁷ But the Fall created a tense relationship between humanity and the earth God created. The sweat and blood required for productivity and fruitfulness means some are going to work too hard and others too little.

There is little satisfaction among many in our community in relation to work. Those who have steady jobs work in factories in nearby cities. Most have not received any job training, which could lead to advancement. The paychecks are inconsistent and meager, depending on inconsistent transportation. Many do not work, citing disabilities. Others, who are able-bodied, do not work steady because of a poor work ethic or the aforementioned drug abuse. Every person interviewed receives government assistance in some form. For some, it is a necessary supplement to their paycheck; without the assistance, they could not make ends meet. For others, their check is the only source of income. Instead of enjoying the satisfaction of productive work, many sit idle. The result of this poor relationship with creation is an unnecessarily hard life, with little hope for the future.

God of the Poor

The ongoing effects of sin caused perpetual harm to the world, including a terrible imbalance of wealth. Sin both creates poverty and sustains an environment hostile to the poor. Some have much, while most have very little. Throughout history, the poor have suffered the most. They are the most vulnerable; the first victims of famine, violence and

³⁷ Genesis 3:15

lack of opportunity. Hunger hits the countryside before the palace. Dallas Willard puts it succinctly:

The problems posed for human life by wealth and poverty are not just concerns of theology and social or personal ethics. They go to the very foundations of the social order. We talk in clinically detached terms of ‘the economy,’ but it is economic issues that open the door to the most repressive and bloody regimes, of the political Right as well as Left.³⁸

Societies tend to neglect or forget the poor, but God continues to care for those who are “the least of these.”³⁹ The scriptures reveal a God who cares deeply for those who are most vulnerable and most susceptible to the dangers of poverty. His affection for those in need seeps off nearly every page of scripture. Again, God is not only concerned with the individual’s spiritual condition. He is also concerned about their physical wellbeing and the health of entire societies. God’s care for the poor is revealed in His miracles, Law, prophets and in His greatest revelation: Jesus Christ.

Poor and Poverty: A Word Study

Any theological inquiry regarding the poor or poverty as described in the Bible requires an understanding of the words in their original language. The ancient languages carry a meaning that is often lost in translation. As demonstrated in this section, God’s concern for the poor is a consistent theme throughout scripture. While the modern reader often equates poverty with a lack of physical necessities, the scriptures paint with a more broad brush in their references to poverty. The word “poor” could reference a social

³⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 195.

³⁹ Matthew 25:40

circumstance, like someone who is a widow or an orphan. In other parts of scripture, “poor” means to be spiritually deprived. Context is the key to deciphering the meaning of each particular reference.

The Old Testament employs a variety of words to describe the poor. The Hebrew word that is most easily translated as poor is ‘ebyôn (אֲבִיּוֹן), which means “destitute, beggar, needy” and also connotes social oppression of the poor.⁴⁰ The term 'ebyôn is used throughout the genres of Old Testament literature as the most basic way expressing the lowly physical and social state of affairs for the poor. Other Hebrew words highlight the physical, spiritual and sensual reality of poverty. Those without enough food are *rûsh* (רֵשׁ),⁴¹ while *qâṭân* (קָטָן)⁴² most often refers to poverty as an object or persons small, insignificant and diminutive in size. A person who is poor because they are unhappy or wretched is *chêle kâ'* (חֵלֶה כֹּא').⁴³ In Psalm 10:8, the New International Version renders *chêle kâ'* as “the victim”, which does aptly not convey the “unhappy, dark, wretched” poor of which the Psalmist speaks.

The Hebrew word ‘ânîy (עֲנִי)⁴⁴ means “one who is depressed, in mind or circumstances,” which points to poverty as mental and spiritual depravation. This bevy of words to describe the same concept (poor, poverty) are often used in tandem as demonstrated by Psalm 70:5a:

⁴⁰ James Strong, *Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), s.v. "ebyôn."

⁴¹ Strong. *rûsh*

⁴² Strong. *qâṭân*

⁴³ Strong. *chêle kâ'*

⁴⁴ Strong. 'ânîy

But as for me, I am **poor** (עני, 'ânîy. Implying a depressed spiritual and physical condition) and **needy** (אביון, 'ebyôn. The physical condition of poverty, a beggar who is subject to oppression)

A variety of meaning is derived from the numerous Hebrew words for poor. The multitude of words gives color to the far-reaching complexities of poverty. The scriptures do not see poverty as a dearth of resources; rather, it is a physical, social, mental and spiritual reality that demands a reckoning from the community of the faithful.

The narrative arc of God's concern for the poor transitions seamlessly from Old Testament to the New. The Greek in the New Testament does not, however, have as many word-variations for poor. The term most often used for poor in the New Testament is ptóchos (πτωχός) which means "poor, destitute, spiritually poor, either in a good sense (humble devout persons) or bad." Ptóchos comes from the root ptōssō which means "to crouch or cover in a defensive position."⁴⁵ A common word in the ancient lexicon, the Greek Classics, such as Homer, used ptóchos to describe those who were reduced to begging and on the lowest rungs of society.

Before its usage in the gospels, ptóchos always had a negative connotation. To be ptóchos was to be deprived of the (natural and social) richness of life. But the New Testament, especially the gospels, add another layer of meaning to ptóchos. To be poor, in lacking the safety of earthly possessions, means that the impoverished are inclined to rely on God and thus enjoy an inward, spiritual satisfaction. This is not to be confused with ancient Stoicism, which was the intentional denial of creature comforts in an effort to

⁴⁵ James Strong, *Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), s.v. "ptochos"

attain inner sanctuary through personal discipline. Rather, to be ptóchos in the New Testament sense means that there is a grand opportunity to rely on a God who provides daily bread. This is highlighted in the story of the rich, young ruler who wanted to follow Jesus.⁴⁶ After assuring Jesus of his righteous lifestyle and devotion to the Law, the erudite young man asked what he needed to do to inherit the Kingdom. Jesus' demand that he "sell all of his possessions and give his money to the poor," and thus becoming ptóchos himself. Luke reports that the young ruler "walked away sadly." The short story reveals a truth interwoven in all of scripture: the kingdom is for the poor and for those who aid the impoverished.

The Over-Spiritualization of Poverty

The discussion about poverty and the spiritual benefits of becoming poor warrant a longer deliberation; much more than we can offer in this short space. It must be asserted that being poor, in the material sense, does not automatically equate with spiritual elevation. The Proverbs make it very clear that poverty is often a result of laziness⁴⁷ and poor planning.⁴⁸ Often times, people are materially poor because they make bad choices. The scriptures do not condone poor choices. On the flip side of the coin, people become wealthy, not by exploiting their workers, but by hard work and virtue. Poverty does not equate to righteousness any more than wealth equates to evil. A delicate balance is required. Jesus called His path a "narrow way" because the believer walks a tight rope on these issues. Christians are not necessarily called to forsake all material goods, as

⁴⁶ Luke 18:18-23

⁴⁷ Proverbs 10:4-5, 12:11, 12:24

⁴⁸ Proverbs 21:5

possessions are necessary for survival and excesses can help those in need.⁴⁹ However, believers are cautioned to test their connection to their wealth and possessions. That is, to make sure possessions do not become spiritually possessive. Too often, to quote a popular movie, “The things you own, end up owning you.”⁵⁰ The Christian is warned to avoid an undue connection to possessions in the false assumption that physical wealth equals security.

Further, there is a tendency among believers to assume that the call to poverty is a call to only spiritual poverty. By this line of thought, one can shop, spend and live beyond their means as long as they presume their own humility in the process. That mentality does not harmonize with the gospel call to kingdom living. American Evangelical Christianity is often accused of being intermeshed with rampant consumerism.⁵¹ The stereotype did not emerge from thin air. Perhaps a contributor to this phenomenon is the imbedded idea that the call to poverty is purely a spiritual order. Evangelical Christians, who prize conversion, constantly and creatively re-tell the story of grace over spiritual death. This insistence on inward, spiritual conversion is vital to the evangelical ethos. Conversion is a vital first step in a new life with God, one that elicits a powerful, emotional and spiritual experience. But conversion only one part the story; believers are called to a new life, new priorities and a new relationship with their possessions.

Evangelical Christians can unwittingly convince themselves of their inward spiritual

⁴⁹ Acts 2:45

⁵⁰ *Fight Club*, Fox Drama Pictures, 1999.

⁵¹ Frank Schaeffer, “Big Time Evangelical Religion: Consumerist Individualism,” *Huffington Post* (blog), June 26, 2009 (5:12 a.m.), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-schaeffer/big-time-evangelical-reli_b_206624.html.

status, calling it poor and humble, while failing to address the consumerism rampant in our culture. It is the sin of the Pharisees in reverse, who were strict and religious on the outside, but cold on the inside. Evangelicals can convince themselves of inward, spiritual poverty while making no outward change.

Poverty in Scripture: A Brief Survey

A brief survey of scripture shows how God reveals Himself in a way that expresses care for the poor. After the Fall in the Garden, the Bible depicts a steady increase in sin and violence. The children of Adam and Even were at odds, culminating with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The seeds of tension sown in the Fall bore fruit of violence in just one generation. These Hebrew epics are telling the all-to-human story of accelerating violence from one generation to the next. By Genesis 6, God was “grieved”⁵² that his creation had become so violent and oppressive. A Great Flood is God’s judgement against a world that is destroying itself, in part, because of the disparity of power brought on by the Fall. The powerful had become so violent that the weak stood defenseless that God chose to flood the world and spare a remnant.

Following the Hebrew epics, God established a chosen people through Abram. It is important to note that, while Abram was not resource poor, he was a nomad and not part of a people group who enjoyed established roots. Abram lived in the outskirts, without the protection of an army or city walls. The chosen people of God were a vulnerable people with no other protection than God Himself. The Church, the new

⁵² Genesis 6:6

chosen people,⁵³ are a vulnerable people with no earthly home. The church is made up of “foreigners and exiles”⁵⁴ who labor and wander as unsettled residents while longing for a Promised Land. Like Abram and his family, the church is a pilgrim people, under the protection of God.

Many pivotal moments in God’s revelation to the world deal with either liberating His people from poverty or punishing them for becoming the oppressors. God chose a certain people to reveal His activity in the world. God’s concern for the Hebrew people, with their long-suffering under slavery, reveals His heart for the oppressed. As Ron Sider aptly notes: “at the crucial moments when God displayed his mighty acts to reveal His nature and will, God also intervened to liberate the poor and oppressed.”⁵⁵

The Exodus was not a political play on behalf of the Hebrew people. God’s people were oppressed by the Egyptians, bound in slavery for generations. His intent in removing the people from Egypt was because he “heard them crying out because of their slave drivers.”⁵⁶ God was rescuing a people in bondage, a theme which runs throughout revelation history.

The Law was given to the newly freed Hebrew people. The preamble to the Ten Commandments cites the liberation from slavery as a central motivation of God’s rescue of the Hebrew people: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of

⁵³ Galatians 6:16

⁵⁴ 1 Peter 2:11

⁵⁵ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (Dallas: Word Pub, 1997), 42.

⁵⁶ Exodus 3:7

Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”⁵⁷ Throughout the Torah, God often says, “I brought you out of slavery...” which implies that His motivation in freeing his people was, in part, because they were a poor and oppressed people.

God gifted the Law to His people as a means of protecting the poor and weak. Every healthy society has a system of laws and justice that protect the innocent from the bad intentions of the powerful. The Ten Commandments are not just a list of “thou shalt not.” They are simple laws that protect the life (6th), property (8th & 10th) and home (5th).⁵⁸ Without Law to govern His people, the weakest and most vulnerable would be the first to suffer. Obedience to the Ten Commandments works to restore the four broken relationship for all people, regardless of economic status.

The Levitical Law protected the poor from both injustice from oppressors and misdirected pity. The poor are to be treated fairly in court, but not pitied to the point of corroding the law. To offer the poor favoritism both compromises the law and condescends to the impoverished. The judges were commanded judges to arbitrate fairly to the rich and the poor. They were commanded not to “show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but [to] judge neighbors fairly.”⁵⁹ This puts the poor and the rich on equal moral ground under the law. The judges should seek the wisdom of God to administer His truth in a way that reflects His concern for all people.

⁵⁷ Exodus 20:2

⁵⁸ Exodus 20:1-17

⁵⁹ Leviticus 19:15

Every corner of the law points to God's overarching care for the poor. The tired and hungry are not the responsibility of a central government or food program. Rather, individuals and families are expected to provide for those in need:

If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.⁶⁰

The tithe was established as a way for the community to gather food at the synagogues and Temple for distribution to the needy. God constantly reminded His people they ought to give to those in need because they were once poor and enslaved:

When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.⁶¹

The Hebrew Festival of Weeks included a benefit for the poor. This harvest festival required God's people to bring an offering of grain and bread to the Temple, along with a sacrifice of livestock. The "first fruits" of the harvest were to be presented to the Lord as a way of remembering that all provision ultimately comes from Him. Even amidst the celebration, the Hebrew people were commanded not to reap the edges of their fields, but to "leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you."⁶² Abundance should be shared with the poorest among the community.

⁶⁰ Deuteronomy 15:7-8

⁶¹ Deuteronomy 26:12

⁶² Leviticus 23:22

After their liberation from Egypt, God's people were punished because they failed to follow the precepts of the Law. God allowed an exile and dispersed His people and in part because they did not care for the poor. The oppressed had become the oppressors. Amos, along with several other Old Testament prophets, decried the disparity of wealth among the people of Israel. Preaching to the Northern Kingdom, Amos saw how the rich would "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth."⁶³ Through Amos, God denounced the wealthy who gained their prosperity by exploiting the poor.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned the Reign of God as a place of harmony and satisfaction. Those who had been haughty and proud would be removed from their thrones and the poor and needy would be elevated. The violence that defined every relationship on earth would be silenced as even the "lion would lay down with the lamb."⁶⁴ God's vision through Isaiah included peace and stability for the poor and needy:

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord

⁶³ Amos 2:7

⁶⁴ Isaiah 11:6

for the display of his splendor.⁶⁵

The Law includes several warnings against being or becoming poor. Being poor is not a virtue in itself. The Israelites were commanded not give more than one-fifth of their wealth to the poor, lest they become poor and in need of assistance.

God's care for the poor is expressed poetically throughout the wisdom literature. God's heart for the vulnerable is not just a legal matter; the early Hebrew songs depict a God who cares for the poor:

Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of His people.⁶⁶

He executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.⁶⁷

The Proverbs offer counsel on wisdom, wealth and a good reputation. Littered among this call to fruitfulness is a constant flow of warnings against ignoring the poor:

He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Isaiah 61:1-3

⁶⁶ Psalm 113:5-8

⁶⁷ Psalm 146:7-9

⁶⁸ Proverbs 14:31

He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker; He who rejoices
at calamity will not go unpunished.⁶⁹

He who oppresses the poor to make more for himself Or
who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.⁷⁰

Throughout every genre of Old Testament literature, God's people were warned against ignoring the plight of the poor; a theme that would continue into the New Testament.

God used many wealthy people to fulfill his purposes: Abraham, Moses, Solomon and Joseph of Arimathea, to name a few. But the rich are warned and chided in a way the poor are not. A rich person faces the temptation to adore their money above God and they may use their wealth to oppress the poor. God has swift justice for those who oppress the poor. Each revelation of God, from the Law and Prophets to the Wisdom literature to the Feasts and Festivals, reveals God's concern for the needy.

The Incarnation

The greatest expression of God's concern for the poor is in Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament, who revealed his care for the poor through the Law, prophets and feasts, continued His revelation seamlessly in Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, Jesus is the culmination and fulfillment of everything God began in the Old Testament. When Jesus announced His ministry in the Nazareth synagogue, he quoted from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because He has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

⁶⁹ Proverbs 17:5

⁷⁰ Proverbs 22:16

and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.⁷¹

The townspeople were not amused at the Galilean's reminder that the poor would benefit first from the ministry of the anointed; they tried to throw Him off a cliff.⁷² Jesus the Messiah is not only the object of adoration and in the spiritual realm. He is a liberator to the poor and oppressed in the physical world. Those who have been in bondage will know the joy of freedom. When Jesus claimed Himself as the Messiah, it was not just because of His ability to perform miracles. It was because He preached to the poor and oppressed. When He healed the sick and gave sight to the blind, it was not simply to reveal the power of God within Him. These miracles were acting in fulfillment of the prophecies about the Messiah who would "open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf...the lame will leap like a deer and the mute tongue will shout for joy!"⁷³ In Jesus, the good news of God, as promised by Isaiah centuries before, is revealed to the poor and weak.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul used the term *kenosis* (κενόω)⁷⁴ to describe the way in which Jesus became incarnate. The English translation, "made Himself nothing" is a helpful, but does not render the full depth of meaning of *kenosis*. To *kenoó*

⁷¹ Luke 4:18-19

⁷² Luke 4:29

⁷³ Isaiah 35:5-6

⁷⁴ James Strong, *Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), s.v. "kenosis."

is to become empty, deprived, valueless and to deprived of content.⁷⁵ The self-emptying of Jesus was more than an act of humility or demotion; He became a lesser version of Himself by taking on mortal flesh, the weight of temptation and the physical pain of humanity. From resplendent glory, He descended to humanity to commiserate with the sin-shattered trials of the world. This descent into the world led him to spend much of His life with the broken, forgotten and vulnerable rural poor and culminated on the cross.

God of the Rural Poor

God cares deeply for the poor, as evidenced throughout scripture. Let's take this a step further: God cares for, and relates directly to, the rural poor. In this section, I will highlight how the effects of the Fall relate to the rural poor and how God empathizes specifically with the plight of the rural poor.

The Bible gives several examples of a God who meets His people beyond the city walls, in the backwoods and fringes of society. Here we meet the God of the rural poor. It is all well and good to claim a "city" for Christ as many churches are fond of doing,⁷⁶ but Christians should not forget that God is just as present beyond the bustle of the city.

Several examples abound in scripture: God set the first people, Adam and Eve, in a beautiful and lush garden. Anyone who has stood at the foot of an Indiana cornfield or walked through the Uwharrie forest in North Carolina knows why God chose to place humanity in a garden (and not a city). Gardens are quiet, beautiful and restful. You can

⁷⁵ James Strong, *Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), s.v. "kenosis."

⁷⁶ The "Rise" campaign at Redeemer Church in New York City, led by Tim Keller is an excellent example of ministry directed at urban areas. See: www.rise.redeemer.com

see the work of God (literally) growing around you. There is peace in a garden. Perhaps this is why Jesus used agricultural analogies so often in his parables. There is a natural sense of wonder and shalom being surrounded by wilderness. Eden was a garden paradise and a foreshadowing of a God who tends to do His most formative work in the serenity of a wilderness and not in the hub-bub of a city.

There is a sharp contrast between the serenity of country life with the constant noise and clatter of the city. More often than not cities depicted in scripture become synonymous with sin: Babel, Sodom, Gomorrah, Babylon and Rome, just to name a few. A Biblical city tends to become a character of its own and usually as a villain. Greater population means more opportunities for sin. Trouble is easier to find downtown than an cornfield.

When God's people were exiled in Babylon, they were cautioned to resist the temptations of the city culture. It is easy to meld into the city and become an homogenous drop in an urban bucket. The early Christians were persecuted in their respective cities because they refused to be absorbed into the norms of city life.⁷⁷ Most cannot resist the temptation to blend into the city. Those who have visited various metropolises, such as Seattle, New York or Chicago, know that the culture of the city effects the personality of the residents. People tend to meld into the culture of their surroundings. The city helps you disappear and lose your individuality in the process. But in the wilderness, one must stand exposed before God with no where to hide.

⁷⁷ Acts 5:17-42

It is not that cities are bad and rural areas are good. But a rural area represent a way of being that necessitates reliance on God. To be rural is to be on the fringe, outside the norms created by the helix of city intelligentsia, culture and connectedness. When the people of Israel were freed from slavery, God led them to wander in the wilderness for generations. In the desert wilderness, God formed His people. Away from the convenience and safety of city walls, they had to wait on manna to fall from heaven, provision straight from the hand of God.

The rural poor in our community do not live near the conveniences of city life. There are no hospitals, grocery stores, food pantries and community services typical of urban areas. But as the scripture reveals, God is just as present in the wilderness. He resides with those beyond the city.

Moses heard the voice of God in the burning bush in the countryside, not the city center.⁷⁸ Naomi and Ruth were bringing in the sheaves on a farm⁷⁹ when God providentially directed their journey. David slew the giant in a valley.⁸⁰ Elijah heard God whisper from inside a cave.⁸¹ Of course, the Bible tells us of palace intrigue and political yammering from national capitals. Plenty of divine stuff happens in cities, but God most often meets with his people in the rural areas.

This theme carries on in the New Testament with God's greatest revelation, Jesus Christ. The announcement of our Savior was made to the lowliest of rural laborers, the

⁷⁸ Exodus 3:1-17

⁷⁹ Ruth 2:2

⁸⁰ 1 Samuel 17

⁸¹ 1 Kings 19:11-13

shepherds tending their sheep.⁸² Mary and Joseph were not city-folk, hailing instead from the bumpkin town of Nazareth. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”⁸³ the people asked pejoratively, because the town was so minuscule. It was a hick town; a blip on the radar and far removed from the refinement of Jerusalem in southern Israel.

Jesus did most of his ministry in rural areas and small towns. He preached in locations with such small populations that the gospel writers usually did not bother to record their names. He simply went from small town to small town preaching the good news.⁸⁴ He fed 5,000 outside the city and preached His greatest sermon on a mountainside. By living, preaching and ministering among the rural populations, Jesus was empathizing with the majority of people in human history. Cities have the glamour and get the attention. But the vast majority of people who have ever lived have done so outside of a metropolis.⁸⁵ Despite the headlines, most of the world hails from small towns. The course of human history tells us we are much more likely to be born in Mayberry and not New York.

Jesus would return to the great metropolis of His day, Jerusalem. Before entering, He would pronounce a prophetic judgment and chastise the spiritual leaders of the city.⁸⁶ In fact, the Upper Room is the only scene inside Jerusalem that is not contentious. Inside

⁸² Luke 2:8-14

⁸³ John 1:46

⁸⁴ Luke 4:14

⁸⁵ North Carolina State University. "Mayday 23: World Population Becomes More Urban Than Rural." ScienceDaily. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/05/070525000642.htm

⁸⁶ Matthew 23

the city, Jesus finds the Temple had become a “den of thieves.”⁸⁷ He would later endure an unjust arrest, a kangaroo court and a sentencing by an angry mob. The same city-dwellers who praised his arrival would shout “crucify” a few days later. Again, the city has a tendency to lead people to follow however the winds are blowing.

The two greatest acts in redemptive history would occur outside the city: the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus was crucified outside the city. The theological imagery is rich. Jesus is the scapegoat, who takes sin upon Him and goes outside the city. The Law was given on Mount Sinai, grace was found on Mount Calvary. The crucifixion took place outside the city, in part, so that God could empathize with the masses of people who have suffered untold pain in the wilderness of history. He suffers with those outside the city walls. He is in the small towns and trailer parks. He knows the suffering of the opioid crisis and domestic violence. God suffered outside the city and “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears”⁸⁸ on behalf of those who suffer in rural areas.

Likewise, the resurrection took place outside the city. The injustice that crucified Jesus wanted to get their stain as far away as possible. So they put Him in a borrowed tomb outside the city limits. But on the third day, as we sing on Easter morning: “Up from the Grave He Arose, with a mighty triumph over His foes!”⁸⁹ Jesus would go back into the city in the greatest act of defiance the world had (or will ever!) know. Jesus defeated death and thereby bucked the injustice and corruption that put Him in the tomb.

⁸⁷ Matthew 21:12-13

⁸⁸ Hebrews 5:7

⁸⁹ From the hymn, “Low in the Grave He Lay” by Robert Lowrey, 1874.

Could the resurrection be a sign of hope to the rural poor? After all, the greatest act of God was not witnessed in a crowded city amphitheater. Rather, the first witnesses were sullen women who had taken a long, quiet early morning walk to anoint the body. Again, this image would be encouraging to rural folks who assume everything worthwhile happens in a big city. Salvation died and rose far from the urban lights.

Conclusion

A “sinful woman” barged into Simon’s home and made a slobbering mess of tears, hair and perfume. The Pharisees went into theological speculation. The disciples were silent. But Jesus of Nazareth welcomed her. Here was a poor woman, disgraced by her actions, snubbed by her peers and sneered by her supercilious Rabbis. Yet Jesus welcomed the woman and honored her actions. After all, Jesus commiserated with her far more than his counterparts. This woman is poor, misunderstood lacking the sophistication of her accusers. Jesus defended the vulnerable woman because He is the most complete revelation of a God who cares for the poor.

There is a glut of theology about urban poverty, racial reconciliation and the global poor, each crafted to meet a present crisis. The rural poor are often overlooked or ignored by theologians, developmental theorists and church strategists. But God has not disregarded His people. He dwells with the trailer trash, opioid addict and the neglected child. He is present in the dilapidated campers and mobile homes, remembering those whom the world has forsaken. It is the task of the Body of Christ, the rural church in particular, to become Christ Incarnate to this forgotten people.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

A common effect of the regenerating work is of the Holy Spirit in the life of many Christians is a concern for the spiritually and physically poor. The convert, realizing the great burden that was lifted, feels a strong conviction to alleviate the suffering of others. The call to evangelize means that believers are eager to share the faith through the proclamation of the gospel and a vibrant social witness to “the least of these.”¹ The primary message of the Christian faith is spiritual; that Christ has come to save sinners from their spiritual condition. Yet the gospel message penetrates every aspect of life. Sin causes poverty, therefore those set free from sin work toward alleviating the effects of the Fall. Christians, rescued from sin and citizens of heaven, persist building a world that matches the heavenly ideal. This message has created both converts and filled food pantries.

God’s concern for the poor and marginalized is a central theme throughout scripture. God’s people, the Israelites, were given specific instructions to care for the vulnerable in their tribes and beyond. They were often punished because of their lack of concern for the afflicted. God’s concern for the poor made a seamless transition from the Old Testament to the New. Jesus preached to the poor and chided religious leaders for their strict observance to Law while neglecting the needs of the vulnerable. In the new covenant, the church was born with a concern for the afflicted. Care for the poor is not an activity of the church. Rather, it is the part of the fabric that weaves together the Jesus followers and their mission.

¹ Matthew 25:40

Yet care for the poor is not a priority, at least for modern evangelical book publishers. Early Christians designated believers to care for widows and orphans and their work prioritized concerns for the poor. As Michael Green notes in the classic *Evangelism in the Early Church*,² the church rose to prominence, in part, because of their hopeful message for the neglected poor. But to peruse Christian bookstores and their websites, we would be left to assume the greatest concern to American evangelicals is how to handle emotional burdens or dealing with a lack of confidence. Shelves are stocked with books on personal spiritual development, worship, church growth, personal finance and exotic Christian diets, but precious few about care for the poor. This is not a slight to Christian publishing and these resources are no doubt helpful to many believers. But it is a good reflection of the priorities of modern Christian customers.

With a few exceptions that will be noted in this section of the thesis-project, it takes some digging for an evangelical Christian to find books that both insist on the truth of scripture and impress a sense of social responsibility for the poor and needy. As Myers notes, evangelical Christians took a decades-long hiatus from social responsibility in the middle of the 20th century:

In the 1920s American evangelicals took a holiday from history when it came to the thinking and doing of social action. Deeply wounded by the modernist-fundamentalist controversy, our conservative forbearers retreated behind the fundamentals of the faith and the singular importance of evangelism and stayed in a defensive posture for almost fifty years.³

² Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2004), 16-17.

³ Bryant L. Myers. *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), Kindle Locations 1434-1437.

As the authority of scripture and basic Christian truth were under constant assault, evangelical Christians were pressured to use their intellectual and theological muscle defend the faith from their liberal counterparts. The theology of Carl F.H. Henry, Stanley Grenz, Al Mohler and John Stott are, in part, a reaction to the hostilities of earlier liberal theologians that discounted scripture and relegated the necessity of individual conversion.

To be sure, there are great contributions concerning social responsibility from liberal theologians. We do not throw out the social justice baby with the liberal theology bathwater. The earliest criticisms of what came to be called evangelical Christianity is the insistence on the spiritual (which insists on conversion, worship, public morality, etc) over social responsibility. On the other hand, evangelical Christians would claim (often correctly) that liberal Christians are less concerned with personal conversion and responsibility to God in favor of idealized notions of a perfect Kingdom on earth. Both sides make important distinctions about the faith and its role in public life.

For this thesis-project, I have drawn on literature from across the theological spectrum that speak to the problems of American rural poverty. It is helpful to utilize the breadth of Christian traditions, but also necessary as no particular denomination or theological bent the final word on social responsibility. There are many important contributions from a diversity of voices within the breath of Christian traditions that speak to God's concern for the poor. Theological insights about poverty are interwoven

throughout this study, ranging from Rauschenbush's⁴ vision for a Christian based society of equity, Ron Sider plea for a moral government to John Piper's insistence on personal responsibility and holy morality en route to a better common humanity. This section of the thesis-project represents a chorus of voices from the myriad of theological perspectives.

Unfortunately, there scant resources devoted to Christian outreach, evangelism or development to the American rural poor. A notable exception is John Perkin's *A Quiet Revolution*,⁵ which gives the account of the author's upbringing in rural Mississippi. Perkin's offers a compelling story of growing up in a racially segregated community and the struggles of rural poverty. Perkin's youth, and the experience of growing up among the rural poor, would serve as the impetus to generate ministries aimed at development for the poor. Though his ministry turned to urban areas later in life, Perkin's story of rural poverty is a rare gem in the study of development for the rural poor.

Perkin's examination of rural poverty is, however, the exception. As aforementioned, there are plenty of books on the heart of God for the poor, global missions, racial reconciliation and urban outreach. There are a few books about evangelization of the poor (not just social responsibility), but precious few explicit regarding ministry to the rural poor. The programs we attempted at Poplar Ridge to a rural trailer park are, so far as I can tell, few and far between.

⁴ Though not elaborated upon in this section of the thesis-project, Rauschenbush's influence on Christians and social engagement is incredibly important. Of the church, he said, "*The Church, the organized expression of the religious life of the past, is one of the most potent institutions and forces in Western civilization. ...It cannot help throwing its immense weight on one side or the other. If it tries not to act, it thereby acts; and in any case its choice will be decisive for its own future.*" Walter Rauschenbush, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic that Woke Up the Church*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). p.xii

⁵ John Perkins. *A Quiet Revolution*. (Barrington, IL: Marshal Publishing, 1985).

The literature for this thesis-project offers a review of books and articles from four categories. First, there are several good books about the development of the global poor from a Christian perspective. These resources speak to the core issues of poverty and how Christians can (and should) work towards viable, long-term solutions to social ills. Second, I review several books about rural congregational ministry, which focus on the unique peculiarities of churches in a rural, agrarian setting. As we will see, none of these books pertain specifically to poverty alleviation, but their insight into rural congregations is helpful. Third, there are helpful tools for local congregations to begin and maintain local social outreach, including books on drug recovery programs. These resources, along with tools for individual personal growth with a focus on mercy ministries, can help develop the desire within a congregation to serve the local poor. Finally, there are books about life for the rural poor in America. These books, written by journalists and storytellers, give a voice to the oft-neglected people who live in fly-over country. Again, there are no books (that I have found) that speak to the type of ministry we initiated at Poplar Ridge. But the compilation of information gathered from these sources has been helpful in offering insight and relevant information as we observe these programs.

Literature concerning the ministries we started at Poplar Ridge, Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery, are a mixed bag. There are plenty of books about drug abuse and recovery, but few that utilize the gospel as a means to recovery. Some of those resources will be outlined in this section. The Community Meal project is certainly not a new innovation. Churches have been eating together since the Acts of the Apostles. However,

there is not a how-to guide available for starting a project like this, nor are there studies and academic papers that reveal the effects of these ministries. The goal of this thesis-project is to review programs that meet the actual needs of rural poor. Though few resources speak to this specific concern, there is significant overlap in the pastiche of literature about poverty, development, practical theology, rural life and drug recovery.

Development for the Global Poor

Offering relief to the vulnerable has been a hallmark of the Christian faith since its inception. Christians have (or should have) an impulse to follow the command of Christ and serve “the least of these.” Believers have a long history of coupling their evangelism with serving the poor and offering relief to the needy. Everywhere Christians have shared the gospel faith, social outreach programs such as hospitals, orphanages and food distribution have followed.

American evangelical Christians gained an increasing awareness to the necessity of concern for the poor. As aforementioned, many evangelical Christians hunkered into a defensive posture to deflect the onslaught of attacks from secular society and liberal Christian theology. Whether or not the decades-long defensive position among evangelicals was necessary is up for debate. What is not up for dispute is how the hiatus from social responsibility took a toll on the evangelical witness.

The religious zeal and passion among evangelical Christians did not just reside in revival services. Billy Graham, perhaps the best avatar of mid-twentieth century American evangelicalism, had a heart for racial reconciliation and spoke boldly against the oppressive communist regimes throughout the world. But Billy Graham social

concerns were the exception among evangelicals, not the rule. American evangelicals were not known for social outreach during the brunt of the 20th century.

In the early 1970's evangelical Christians began to emerge from their cocoon. The First International Congress on World Evangelization met in Lausanne, Switzerland in an attempt to bring consensus among evangelicals the world over. After much wrangling and wrestling over the most important doctrines of the faith. The 2,300 attendees (eventually) signed the The Lausanne Covenant, which affirmed evangelical convictions. An important outgrowth of the congress was The Committee for World Evangelism, which marked a re-awakening for evangelicals and their commitment to social responsibility. The Lausanne Conference was an attempt to bring together evangelicals throughout the world to create a unified voice on essential matters of the doctrine and witness. A healthy debate erupted about the role in ministry that evangelicals should play in alleviating social ills. Many theologians, no doubt jaded by the constant assault on the orthodox faith, insisted that Christians needed to focus primarily on preserving doctrine and continue pressing the morality of the individual believer. Others believed that neglecting the poor, for whatever the reason, is contrary to the precepts of the Christian faith.

John Stott acted as mediator between the two groups and, with flair and articulation, expressed how both orthodox doctrine and social responsibility are not contrary to one another. In fact, Stott purported, both are necessary to fully express a genuine Christian witness. The Lausanne Committee produced a seminal paper on the subject, edited by Stott: *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment*. The 56-page paper defines evangelism in the light of social responsibility,

offers theological and scriptural weight to the subject and gives an eschatological vision of God's kingdom come. Stott never shies away from the evangelical commitment to conversion, Biblical authority and personal responsibility before God. He does, however, attempt to broaden the horizons of evangelicals and see how social responsibility is part and parcel of a zealous Christian faith.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Lausanne Conference on the evangelical social witness. Not only did it find consensus among a broad swath of evangelicals, it articulates the clear and vital teachings in scripture regarding the Christian role social responsibility. The paper acknowledges the tensions among evangelicals, but insists that relief of the poor beyond the walls of the church building, is essential for the life and perpetuity of the ekklesia.⁶ Several evangelical authors have emerged in recent years to write about both the beauty of the evangelical faith and the need for social responsibility. A careful reading of these books reveals how the Lausanne Conference and Stott's important paper, have impacted the evangelical view of outreach to the poor.

As evangelicals have emerged from their defensive position, there has been a rapid maturation of thought regarding engagement with the poor. In the decades leading to the 1980's, evangelicals looked at poverty alleviation efforts as a tool of the Christian left. However, in just a few short years, some of the best thinkers on the topic are evangelical Christians. One such author is Bryant Myers who wrote a masterpiece on the subject: *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational*

⁶ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship. *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment*. Lausanne Occasional Paper 21, 1982, 7.

Development. The book has become a go-to guide for those interested in Christian social development. *Walking with the Poor* is an invaluable resource in learning and implementing genuine efforts to ease poverty.

Walking with the Poor has a central premise: Christians ought to work towards transformational development of the poor.⁷ This means efforts to alleviate poverty need to be holistic, encouraging spiritual, social and physical development. Myer's chides western evangelical Christians for their unconscious belief that the spiritual and physical dimensions are entirely separate. This leads to ministries that attempt to offer relief by purely physical efforts, without addressing the spiritual problems that actually cause poverty. Think of short-term mission trips where a well meaning group of young adults paints a fellowship hall in a church in the developing world, leaves some cash and flies home. While the intention may be pure, these efforts hardly address the conflicts that created the impoverished mess in the first place. Nor do they offer viable solutions for human flourishing Myers sharply contends the poor deserve "better than gifted amateurs with their hearts in the right place."⁸ A deeper, more mature understanding of poverty alleviation is required; one that insists upon the development of the poor.

Myers thesis of Christian transformational development contends that Christian charity workers ought to "seek positive change in the whole life materially, socially, psychologically and spiritually" among the poor.⁹ Myers then delves into the thought,

⁷ Bryant L. Myers. *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Revised and Expanded Edition. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), Kindle Location 3828.

⁸ Myers. *Walking With The Poor*, Kindle Location, 544.

⁹ Myers. *Walking With The Poor*, Kindle Location, 567.

history and practices of Christian development, warts and all. Christians have (almost) always had good intentions to love and serve the needy, but efforts are too often misguided. To effectively combat poverty, Christians need a philosophical understanding of what they are up against. An entire section of *Walking with the Poor* is devoted to different strains of thought regarding Christian development. Myers outlines several important thinkers in the field and the implications of their differing views. For instance, Robert Chambers views poverty as entanglement, which identifies the variety of internal and external forces that act as an interlocking web of oppression among the poor. Ravi Jayakaran views poverty as a lack of freedom, which disables human flourishing. While these difference may seem subtle, it is important to understand differing depictions, as each articulation shines a light on the complex problem of poverty. How one views poverty determines how they are going to fight against it. Myers puts these thinkers in conversation with one another in order to give the reader a more mature view of poverty.¹⁰

Myers contends that poverty is, at its core, entirely relational. The lack of resources (food, shelter, etc.) are by-products of failed relationships:

Poverty is a result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.¹¹

¹⁰ Part 2 of *Walking with the Poor* offers a helpful summary of the origins of development and the various experts who have contributed to the discussion. Kindle Location, 945.

¹¹ Bryant L. Myers. *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), Kindle Location 3209.

This lack of peace in vital areas of life is due to a lack of meaningful relationships, primarily with God and then with brokenness with others, creation and self. Using a Biblical premise, Myers outlines how each of these broken relationships both causes and sustains poverty. He is quick to say that poverty is not just a problem of the materially poor. Rather, a person can have reasonable economic grounding, while enduring terrible impoverishment in the spiritual and social realms.

The final section of *Walking with the Poor* is a tour de force regarding the practical application of Christian development. Myers offers practical strategies to implement these programs on local and global levels. He contends that development should always be the aim and encourages Christians to put their support in ministries and efforts that are determined to develop the entire person.

Other resources have followed suit in recent years. *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution* is written Barry Asmus, a sociologist and Wayne Grudem, a prominent evangelical theologian. The two team up to write *Poverty of Nations*, which plays off the classic, *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith. Both books insist that a nation can only prosper if their citizens are good and virtuous.

In *The Poverty of Nations*, Asmus and Grudem seek to address the question: Why are some nations poor? How is it that some nations thrive and have a higher quality of life for their citizens while others dwell in poverty. The authors remind us that, despite a century long free-market revolution that has lifted much of the world out of abject poverty, there are still more than a billion people who live on less than a dollar a day. Why have some excelled while other remain in poverty. Their work is exhaustive as they

use data compiled by a variety of sources to examine the question of national poverty.

Asmus and Grudem contend that poverty can be alleviated through the free-market when it is coupled with a virtuous citizenry. More than anything, *The Poverty of Nations* is a book about causes of poverty among poor countries. The authors freely admit they are not writing to small communities or individuals. Rather, they wrote hoping that leaders in destitute nations, especially Christian leaders, would hear their call to encourage freedom and virtue among their citizens.

Like everyone who studies the issue of poverty, they do not have any simple answers. In fact, they developed over 70 contributing factors to national poverty, including geography, weather, mismanaged (or violent) governments, hostile neighbors and so on. They also contend that poverty is not just about material resources.¹² Asmus and Grudem disagree wholeheartedly those who contend poverty that can be alleviated with effective redistribution.

Because of these authors, and several others, evangelical Christians enjoy a place at the table in the discussion of development of the poor. With the end of the decades-long hiatus from an emphasis on social engagement, evangelicals have emerged as sincere, committed and willing to wade into the deep waters of development for the poor.

Ministry in Rural Congregations

Christianity in rural America has a long and colorful history. From John Wesley and the circuit riders to present day country congregations, American Christians have long been at ease worshipping beyond the city limits. There are countless congregations,

¹² Barry Asmus and Wayne Grudem, *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), Kindle Location 727.

of all shapes and sizes, that dot the landscape of rural America. While there are no resources specifically on the topic of social outreach to the American rural poor, there are several good books about ministry in a rural setting. The distinction is important.

As a rule, rural churches consist of rural people. Those who choose to live in a rural setting usually do so because they have certain preferences and values that are easier to fulfill beyond city life. Churches that consist of rural people are going to reflect their shared values. There are also important economic factors at play that make urban and rural churches distinct. Rural churches are often replete with farmers or those who work in agriculture or a similar field while urban and sub-urban congregations will likely have people who work in office settings. Of course, this is not a hard-and-fast rule, as ease of travel means the elderly farmer can worship in the city church and the urban-dwelling millennial can worship in the country. However, as a rule, the sensibilities of rural people often create the culture of the rural church.

Books about rural ministry have become something of a cottage industry in recent decades. These books paint a lovely picture of a slow and quiet rural life, with congregations that are loving, peaceful and patient. These books often work off the assumption that rural people make up rural congregations and, therefore, the pastor should utilize the identity of the church in pastoral care and crafting a vision for the future of the church.

In *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America*, Glenn Damon encourages the rural church to act as an example for the urban and sub-urban church. His 2018 book made waves by asserting that rural congregations

tend to exemplify the most beautiful aspects of Christian community (fellowship, genuine concern for church family, outreach, etc.). In a day when “modern church success is found in how many are served rather than whom are served,”¹³ rural congregations can actually be instructive to their urban and suburban counterparts, and not the other way around. The author contends that the rural congregations are largely forgotten in American church history books and are often viewed as a drain on diminishing denominational resources. Rural ministry is neglected in favor of rapidly growing urban and suburban churches, with the assumption that those ministries are somehow doing more innovative work. The American rural church, much like rural America in general, is neglected in favor of seemingly cutting-edge urban lifestyles. Damon continues:

...the rural church does not make headlines, and rural pastors are not asked to speak at conferences. The common perception is that the rural church is bound by legalism and antiquated tradition.¹⁴

Thankfully, *The Forgotten Church* paints a different picture by offering a helpful insight into the dynamics of rural congregations. An unfortunate side-effect of an uber-connected internet age is an increasing divide between disparate people. The internet causes us to retreat into our tribes. With a few clicks, we can hear news, commentary and entertainment that suits our narrow preferences. As a result, there is an increasing disconnect between urban and rural neighbors. Damon cites a stunning statistic about this divide: “Today, more than ever in our history, the 83 percent of Americans who live in

¹³ Glenn Damon, *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 24.

¹⁴ Damon, *The Forgotten Church*, 25.

metropolitan areas have about as much real-life knowledge the other 17 percent, and of rural American in general, as they do of central Africa.”¹⁵ Damon shares the pursuit of his secular counterparts who have a heart for rural America. Those who live beyond the city are misunderstood, neglected, forgotten, and subsequently ridiculed. He states a sobering truth:

When we fail to understand and value a culture and people,
we eventually value and probably ridicule them. This is
true of rural culture.¹⁶

The Forgotten Church helps identify the important differences between rural and urban people and how that may affect congregational life. Rurality is, according to the author, “not just a demographic delineation; it is a people and a way of life.”¹⁷ This is manifest in three ways. First, and most obvious, rural people are products of their environment. They live in rural places, which forms a common identity based on a shared set of values that are specifically rural. Second, rural people view their job as their life and the life in their work. Rural people who, as aforementioned, tend to work in higher risk, hands on jobs, tend to create a culture around their rough and tumble work. Working as a farmer, miner or logger creates sensibilities that differ sharply from the nine-to-five office worker. Third, rurality encompasses a shared set of values, that tend to bend toward religion, self-control, and social conservatism.¹⁸

¹⁵ Glenn Damon, *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 29.

¹⁶ Damon, *The Forgotten Church*, 29.

¹⁷ Damon, *The Forgotten Church*, 33.

¹⁸ Damon, *The Forgotten Church*, 33-37.

Damon has an excellent chapter on rural poverty. Many other books on rural ministry refer to the simple, slower life of country people, but do not speak to issues of poverty. However, in *The Forgotten Church*, Damon outlines many of the complexities of rural poverty and the struggles of rural Americans to rise out of that economic situation. Damon confirms many of the assumptions that people have about rural poverty; that small towns rely on one mill or factory for the brunt of their economic viability. When those factories close or are outsourced, a natural depression and despair blankets these small communities. While this is a sad reality in many small towns, the poverty of rural America goes beyond sour economics and lack of employment opportunity. Many rural communities are rife with drug abuse, domestic violence, broken homes and food insecurity. Damon correctly states that many small-towns in America are in a communal malaise. The generational poverty in rural America creates a miry clay of problems that entangle the poor. To contend that poverty is just a lack of jobs or income is to dismiss the broad, far-reaching complexities that create and sustain rural poverty.

Perhaps the most honest assessment of rural congregational life is Brad Roth's, *God's Country: Faith, Hope and the Future of the Rural Church*. While much of the sentiment regarding rural life either lionizes the rural life or condescends to country folk, Roth offers a more holistic vision. Country churches are just that: in the country. As such, they should not be pigeonholed as being slow and gentile nor backwoods and irrelevant. Rather, says Roth, they just persist in the Kingdom where God has placed them. Roth states, "We need a new approach, one that sees rural communities not as places to pity or

lionize but simply as places, places open to God's goodness and in need of God's grace."¹⁹

Rural congregations should have a topophilia (love of place) that drives the mission and ministry of the church. In a world where everything is pre-packed for consumption (including churches), rural churches can offer a small, often messy but genuine testimony to the world. The rural church is "a sign of Christ's commitment to being present with people in all places."²⁰

The most refreshing aspect of *God's Country* is the storytelling. The author recounts several stories of rural congregational life, some flattering and others embarrassing. The running theme through *God's Country*, not often found in other books on rural ministry is the call to take the gospel beyond the walls of the rural church. The blessing of the rural church is her small, tight-knit community. But that connectedness is also a curse, as some churches are unwilling to welcome new people. Roth insists on G.O.O.D. (Get Out Of the Doors!) ministry where rural congregations are seeking the lost and welcoming new people with open arms.

Shannon O'Dell offers an unlikely account of rural congregations in *Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals*. While every other book on rural ministry speaks of the need for healthy, typically small rural churches, O'Dell contends that rural churches can and should grow to massive sizes. *Transforming Church* tells his story, in which he reluctantly agrees to pastor a dying rural church and helped guide it

¹⁹ Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church*, Kindle Edition (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 2017), Kindle Location 184.

²⁰ Roth, *God's Country*, 157.

until it became a mega church in a few short years. Most of the book is the author recounting how he navigated through the small church mindset to grow the church into an mega church. O'Dell never really elaborates on how the church grew to that size, because the point of the story is not the church growth. Rather, he colorfully elucidates leadership skills necessary to help a small country church grow into a mega-church. *Transforming Church* is an amazing story, but not easily relatable to most rural congregations.

The premise of *Transforming Church*, that rural churches can and should grow into larger ministries, is not realistic when most rural congregations do not have the resources or charismatic leadership to grow to that size. And, of course, not all churches are called to be mega-churches. But *Transforming Church* is still a very important book. The author does a fine job describing the mentality of small town congregations with their friendly hospitality, tight-knit community and fierce loyalty. He contends (correctly) that rural churches “rural people come from rich church heritages — but so few have experienced the living Cornerstone of the Church, and so the buildings and the congregations are dwindling, falling into disrepair, collapsing.”²¹ He depicts the other side of the coin as well when some of the small church leadership shun, gossip and glare after they decided they do not approve of his big vision. In *Transforming Church*, the reader gets an honest depiction of small church life and the struggles that pastors will endure if they have a vision to grow.

O'Dell's ideas about rural church growth are contrasted with Roth's vision of a small rural church owning its identity and serving their community. Though the visions

²¹ Shannon O'Dell, *Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking All The Rurals* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2010), Kindle Location 190.

are different, both have a place within the discussion of rural ministry. Using resources such as these, rural congregations must discern their course based on their context and leading.

During a semester on the campus of St. Paul School of Theology, author and professor of theology Dr. Tex Sample, asked the students in his Mainline American Christianity course to interview “hard living people.” These are folks, as described by Sample, who are “looked down on as street people, poor white trash, homeless, disreputable, drunks, addicts...sluts, bikers, vagabonds and the no-goods.”²² They quickly learned that interviews are an inferior method to gain information. The best way to hear from hard living people is to ask them to share their story. Oral storytelling among the people in lower socio-economic brackets is often part of the culture. Sample compiled over 400 stories of hurting people, as well as pastors and Christian leaders and wrote, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians*. This little book is an incredibly valuable resource for a congregation that wants to welcome people who are outside the bounds of cultural norms. Sample contends that churches tend to bend one way or the other; either full of hard-living people or mainline “respectable” denominational congregations. He rejects any church healthy model that prizes homogeneity and instead insists that a robust congregation will have rich and poor in worship and community together.

The central thesis is that mainstream Christians do not want to engage hard-living folks, nor do they know how. There is a lot of ministry to hard-living people, but not a lot of ministry and mission with people in a lower economic bracket.

²² Tex Sample, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 13.

Sample cites language as the key division among these classes. Hard living people use a lot of four-letter words that do not compute well in polite congregations. Most mainstream Christians shy away at the first swear word. Those who can withstand the language are later put off by the tattoos, general appearance, hygiene, work ethic (or lack thereof) and addictions. A divide, according to Sample, exists between the respectability-oriented Christians and hard-living people.

Sample offers important guidance on how to begin reaching out to hard living people.²³ Rather than providing actionable steps or a strategy, he offers philosophical guidance on opening the doors to the church. He contends that churches (who do not have a population of hard-living people) ought to develop relationships first and gradually welcome them into the life of the church. He offers a host of ideas to build relationships and asserts that this takes time, patience and emotional capital. In a very honest and telling section, Sample asserts that the long-time members of the church, who typically prize order and respectability, will push back against these efforts. They should be comforted and assured, rather than shunned. A pastor who works to soothe the doubts about these outreach ministries will find more friends than enemies.

Resources for the local church

Much of the literature reviewed in this section of the thesis-project appeals to theologians and church leaders. Most of the books assume the reader has a grasp on scripture, church history and basic theological terms. But many resources are likely over the head of the average congregant. Several resources have emerged in the last decade

²³ Tex Sample, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 76-77.

that are useful as resources for the church goer. A pastor or church leader who wants their church to engage in local, social ministry has a bevy of resources at their fingertips.

David Platt has emerged as both a prophetic and pastoral voice for evangelicals who desire to help the poor and needy. His book, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*, is a helpful guide to get Christians thinking about social outreach and God's concern for the poor. *Radical* offers a solid outlay of God's plan for salvation in Christ through the lens of His love for the entire world. Platt does not deny that evangelicals have been on the primrose path, with an unfortunate tendency towards inwardly focused, sometimes selfish, Christianity that focuses on the spiritual condition of the individual. *Radical* expresses an obvious truth: that salvation should be offered to the poor and not just the suburbanite. Platt has gained an international platform by cautioning American evangelicals about consumerism and focusing too much on personal salvation and worship experience.²⁴

Platt is careful not to berate the church, unlike his predecessors in the so-called "emergent church movement." The 2000's saw the rise of the authors like Brian McLaren, Rob Bell and Phyllis Tickle who rose to prominence by articulating sharp critiques of evangelical churches and called them to a Christian witness that included care for the poor. The movement was deeply flawed from the start as many of the emergent authors elevated social responsibility over doctrinal integrity, instead of blending the two. The emergent church movement signaled virtue and berated evangelicals but failed to call

²⁴ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Press, 2010). The first section of *Radical* offers a theological summary of the Christian faith that is both grounded in evangelical thought and accessible to the lay member.

the whole church to unity and action. The last gasps of the emergent church movement offered only half-hearted spirituality and a blurry, overtly-politicized call to social responsibility. The emergent church was merely a publishing fad and turned out to be less of a movement and more of a moment. Emergent church resources, of which there are plenty, have some good insights from well-intentioned authors, but are a net negative for the local church.

Tim Keller is a prominent evangelical who rose above the fray in the conversation about social responsibility. The Redeemer Church in New York City (of which he is the long time pastor) started the “Rise” campaign which continues to influence ministries in several cities throughout America and the world. The concept is that the church should be a resource for the community in ways that are mutually beneficial. When the church follows the call to “build the Kingdom” by encouraging schools, food pantries, community and social services, everyone benefits (even non Christians) and the church lives out her mission. Keller penned a book that outlines the combination of grace and justice and their theological and social implications: *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace makes us Just*.

Keller wrote *Generous Justice* for those Christians who do not yet understand, “that when the Spirit enables us to understand what Christ has done for us the result is a life poured out in deeds of justice and compassion for the poor.”²⁵ The purpose of *Generous Justice* is twofold. First, it is an attempt to answer those critics of the church who believe that Christians are racist, homophobic and otherwise disconnected with the

²⁵ Timothy J Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York, N.Y.: Dutton, 2010), xiii.

plight of the poor. Second, Keller hopes to restore a sense of Godly justice among believers. As a pastor and articulate Reformed theologian, Keller ties together the grace and justice of God. The term “justice” is not simply tied to the spiritual reality of justification. Rather, justice is something that permeates the soul and body of the believer; and a desire for justice should pour into the aching parts of the world. It is a simple read that serves as a good resource for lay members dipping their toes into the Christian role of social responsibility.

Another useful resource that would be especially beneficial in a small group study is *The Externally Focused Church*. This book is helpful in encouraging social responsibility by offering simple ideas about church outreach using only layman’s terms. The premise is a simple but pressing question from the authors: “If your church vanished, would your community weep?”²⁶ The content of the book is simple but compelling and accessible to even new believers. Each chapter has questions for discussion and an “action plan” to put the ideas into practice. It is not a church growth resource, nor does it use service to the local community as a means to evangelism, as explained in books like *Conspiracy of Kindness*.²⁷ *The Externally Focused Church* explains Biblical concepts like justice, mercy and proper motivation for doing good deeds. The emphasis is on assessing the needs of the local community and building healthy relationships with those on the margins.

²⁶ Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004), 11.

²⁷ “Servant evangelism” was a trend in the 1990’s-2000’s among evangelicals Christians. The idea was to share the gospel through acts of sheer, audacious kindness. Sjogren encouraged Christians to clean toilets of restaurants, give away popsicles at parks and the like. These activities were useful in evangelism but could not be qualified as either aid or development. Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness: A Unique Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus*. Revised ed. (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2008).

Ron Sider's, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* can be a useful resource for the local church. Sider was a forefather of the prophets to evangelicals, calling the church to couple their spiritual fervor with passion for the physically and socially broken. The fact that Sider has become more politically partisan in recent years should not deter Christians from considering his classic book. *Rich Christians* calls believers to task for living in relative opulence while much of the world is hungry. The book has simple, down-to-earth examples of Christian ministry throughout the world and their lasting impact on human flourishing.²⁸ *Rich Christians* attempts an apples-to-apples comparison of the American wealth beside the poverty of the global masses. Sider's thesis is intended to shame relatively wealthy Christians, a premise which simplifies both wealth and poverty. He offers few practical, local solutions to the problems posed and does not articulate a clear path to a healthy development for the poor. However, the theological premises and inspiring stories are worth the read and would likely inspire believers to consider the Biblical call to social justice.

Perhaps the most focused resources for helping a church turn their attention to the plight of their local poor comes from the Chalmers Center.²⁹ Named after the 19th century Scottish pastor, Thomas Chalmers, the institute seeks push evangelicals toward a broad and mature understanding of the reality of poverty. The seminal, and most widely read, book from the Chalmers Institute is *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself*. Authors Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert begin

²⁸ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (Dallas: Word Pub, 1997), 32-41.

²⁹ <https://www.chalmers.org>

with an honest, if painful, thesis: well-meaning Christians tend to do more harm than good when it comes to local outreach.³⁰ *When Helping Hurts* uses all the subtlety of sledgehammer to contend that Christian charity often does more harm than good.

According to the authors, Christians are charitable in a way that is self-serving. Christians are often paternalistic and condescending to the poor.³¹ Additionally, because there is a natural good intrinsic feeling that comes with giving to someone in need, Christians give without considering the long-term effects or whether it is actually doing any good. This creates a false sense of pride in the believer, and shames the poor recipient, as the charity is a reminder of their blighted condition.

In *When Helping Hurts*, the authors follow Bryant Myer's lead and encourage the development of the poor, rather than aid to the poor. This distinction is important. Aid is giving to someone who has an immediate need. Development means working a positive, intentional effort to the betterment of the downtrodden. Development is giving the pole and teaching the poor to fish. It is more difficult to develop, as it requires emotional and financial resources along with a long-term vision for betterment. Conversely, aid is a short term fix that treats the symptoms of a situation rather than the illness. When we see someone who needs food, clothing or shelter, many Christians are incited to provide without a moment's notice. But this short-sided charity does not actually improve their lot in life and, sadly, they may use the newfound resources for malevolent purposes. As a rule, Christians tend to be very good at aid and poor at development. Corbett and Finkert

³⁰ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Pub, 2012), 62.

³¹ Corbett and Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts*, 109.

challenge the church to look beyond short-term charity and to invest in development programs that lead to human flourishing. *When Helping Hurts* is the most focused resource for local churches, as it provides helpful stories, statistics and easy-to-grasp concepts that even casual church goers can understand.

The Chalmers Center has published several study guides that compliment *When Helping Hurts*. For instance, *When Helping Hurts: The Small Group Experience* is a six-week study that has a video and an easy-to-follow lesson plan for leaders. One does not need to be very well versed in the complications of alleviating poverty to lead this study. Each week includes resources like guiding questions, imaginary scenarios and Bible verses for in-depth study.

For the church that wants to start a local outreach project, like a food assistance program or drug recovery ministry, *When Helping Hurts: In Church Benevolence* is very useful. The small guide provides a glut of resources to help the church make the best decisions. It outlines some of the more complex ideas in *When Helping Hurts* and encourages churches to create a simple screening process for people who seek assistance. Included in *When Helping Hurts: In Church Benevolence* are sample forms³² that can be easily recreated to use at the local level to use during an interview with someone who is seeking assistance. Finally, *When Helping Hurts: In Short-Term Missions* is another helpful resource for churches looking to provide relief to those in far off lands. The premise is that Christians, well-intended as they may be, end up doing more harm than good on short-term mission trips. Groups fly in with matching t-shirts, do jobs beyond

³² Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts: In Church Benevolence* (Chicago: Moody Pub, 2015), 67.

their skill set, take some selfies, and go home feeling self-satisfied. The whole enterprise is usually a net-negative for the local people and creates a dangerous dependency-oriented relationship.³³ The authors encourage trips, but offer practical guidelines for providing the very best assistance. *When Helping Hurts: In Short Term Missions* is helpful by introducing ideas that can be used when a church is determined to have a positive, lasting impact by doing short term mission projects.

In the vein of *When Helping Hurts*, author Robert Lupton offers very helpful advice in two popular books. Lupton caused a stir among charity-minded folks with *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help*. The author contends that well-meaning Christians often cause long-term damage while trying to fulfill the Biblical call to serve the poor. Lupton acknowledges that Americans are extraordinary charitable. However, “while we are very generous in charitable giving, much of that money is either wasted or actually harms the people it is intended to target.”³⁴ Lupton offers countless examples of harmful giving; from dependency-creating food pantries to short term mission trips that he calls “religious tourism.” The solution, like poverty itself, is extremely complicated. He returns to a common theme: genuine, effective ministry that alleviates poverty must begin with solid relationships. A community can be transformed, but only when those receiving the help begin to take up the mantle of ownership and leadership.

³³ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: In Short-Term Missions* (Chicago: Moody Pub, 2014), 13.

³⁴ Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help...And How to Reverse It* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 1.

Lupton followed *Toxic Charity* with *Charity Detox: What Charity Would Look Like if We Cared About the Results*. This book explores the potential of charitable people, especially Christians, to do long-term development. If *Toxic Charity* is a diagnosis of the problem among charity-minded Christians, *Charity Detox* is the prognosis. It offers helpful, optimistic guidance to people who want to affect positive change in their community. A common thread through the book is that charitable people like to give in a way that suits them, not the poor. Charity, like a Christmas present, is always supposed to be received with extreme gratitude. Lupton insists that charity should be given with the results in mind. That is, givers should have a long term vision for their recipient. For instance, how does the one-way giving of a toy giveaway at Christmas actually better the life of the recipient? The joy is fleeting for both giver and recipient. Ministries should be enacted with the simple premise: charity has either a positive or “toxic” affect.³⁵ All charity, particularly Christian based generosity, should work towards positive, collaborative development.

Like most books on community transformation and development, Lupton’s books are aimed at the inner city. The text never expressly says that it is for urban areas, but every example and initiative is in the context of more populated areas. The examples and testimonials are inspiring, yet Lupton’s work provides little practical help to a poor, rural community.

Another useful resource for lay members is *Life’s Healing Choices: Freedom from Your Hurts, Hang-ups, and Habits*. Written by John Baker, a recovering alcoholic turned

³⁵ Robert D. Lupton, *Charity Detox: What Charity Would Look Like if We Cared About the Results* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 24.

Rick Warren acolyte, this book outlines the philosophy of the Celebrate Recovery program. *Life's Healing Choices* is useful for anyone who is looking for freedom from a “hurt, hang-up or habit” such as addiction, grief or loss. Baker writes for the average lay person, skipping statistical or haughty theological language that may bore the reader. Instead, the book is replete with personal testimonies and anecdotes that let the reader know they are not alone in their struggle.

Life's Healing Choices is useful for those who wish to develop personal spiritual disciplines. A consistent problem among addicts is their lack of follow through on even the smallest commitments. The Celebrate Recovery program works to develop a stronger sense of commitment by encouraging daily disciplines such as prayer, journaling, confession and community. Each chapter ends with an “Action Step” that the participant can take toward a healthier life of discipline.

Life's Healing Choices, like Celebrate Recovery, is based on the beatitudes of Jesus. Instead of the familiar 12-step program used by Alcoholics Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery has 8 steps that lead to wholeness. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, they are ascending in importance; the first step in Celebrate Recovery (like AA) is the admission of guilt. Baker contends that the addict must first recognize their “hunger and thirst” for spiritual satisfaction.³⁶ Each chapter gives a thorough, but not complicated, examination of a beatitude as it relates to addiction recovery.

³⁶ John Baker, *Life's Healing Choices: Freedom from Your Hurts, Hang-ups, and Habits* (New York: Howard Books, 2007), 13.

Resources for Personal Development

There are resources that are helpful for personal spiritual development of the individual Christian who wants to serve the poor. Most everything discussed in this section is for the classroom or small group study. But there are a few good resources that can both develop the spiritual life while raising an awareness to God's desire to heal the hurting.

Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals is a daily prayer guide which contains liturgy and songs from the scope of Christian tradition. The editors offer a simple, liturgical prayer book for those wanting to deepen their spiritual life and develop their concern for the poor. *Common Prayer* takes the reader through three prayer times a day, which includes liturgy, scripture readings and words of Christian devotion, usually about social justice. The afternoon and evening prayers repeat each day, while the morning prayers differ each day. *Common Prayer* includes spiritual practices which steer the reader toward concern for the poor. The reader will have to wade through some not-so-vague anti-American and anti-capitalist sentiments, and the authors have a clear eye for the urban poor. Nonetheless, it is a useful liturgical resource to teach those with a heart for the poor how to pray.

Prayers for a Privileged People is another resource that could prove useful for personal spiritual devotion. Walter Bruggemon, best known for his interpretation of the Old Testament prophets, wrote several prayers that raise the readers awareness about issues concerning social justice. They are a beautiful pastiche of lovely poetry about God's grace intermittent with cutting indictments of half-hearted believers. Some of the

prayers, especially about love for government and consumerism, are especially relevant to people on both side of the political aisle.

Finally, the *Poverty and Justice Bible* provides a variety of helpful articles and study resources for those wanting to read scripture through the lens of social justice. The publishers go to great lengths to reveal common threads of justice throughout scripture. The edition contains several helpful sidebars, charts and references that give the reader an understanding of the Bible's long bent towards justice and God's concern for the poor. In an age where every hobby has a novelty Bible edition³⁷, the *Poverty and Justice Bible* stands out by shining a light on themes of justice that often go unnoticed but he casual reader.

Books about the Rural Poor in America

In November 2016 Donald Trump shocked the political world and journalistic soothsayers by winning the presidency of the United States. Polls would show that poor and working class rural voters turned out for him by large margins.³⁸ Something about his message, which was so offensive to many urban people, clearly resonated with rural Americans. In a scramble to learn more about the rural American voter, many journalists turned to two books: *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* and *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis*.³⁹ Even though both books

³⁷ Examples include: Sportsmans Bible, Maxwell Leadership Bible, Duck-Commander Bible, Teen Bible for Guys/Gals, Family Life Bible, etc...

³⁸ Danielle Kurtzleben, "Rural Voters Played A Big Part In Helping Trump Defeat Clinton" NPR. November 14, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/14/501737150/rural-voters-played-a-big-part-in-helping-trump-defeat-clinton>.

³⁹ Paul Lewis, "Hillbilly Elegy author JD Vance on Barack Obama: 'We dislike the things we envy'." The Guardian. January 25, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/25/hillbilly-elegy-jd-vance-barack-obama-interview>.

predated the election, they shot to the top of Amazon's bestseller list after the Trump victory. There was a renewed, if brief, desire to from urban dwellers to learn more about their rural neighbors.

Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash* provides a survey of the white underclass in America. The story of American history is of heroes, villains and victims. The heroes are the founders, who defied an empire and sailed west to pursue their God-given freedom. The villains are the monarchist Brits. The victims of the American experiment are the slaves and Native Americans who were used and dismissed at will. Isenberg delves deeper into the story of early America and shines a long light on a mostly forgotten people who live between the lines in American history textbooks: there has always been a poor, white underclass in America.⁴⁰

The earliest Americas had perceptions about the rural poor that still persist today. Many in the white underclass were considered lazy and unproductive. Then, as now, a person's worth is determined by their ability to contribute to society. The earliest Americans considered human labor the marker of dignity and worth and derided those without a strong work ethic.⁴¹ Those who did not subscribe to the standard work load were deemed useless and shunned to the margins of society. Isenberg recounts the struggle of each burgeoning state to deal with their lower-class population. Isenberg continues through modern day and offers a helpful summary of American rural poverty. She contends that white, underclass Americans continue to be overlooked and their

⁴⁰ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016), 321.

⁴¹ In Chapter 1, Isenberg states the case that worth was tied to wealth, particularly in land ownership. Isenberg threads this idea through the chapters leading up to the modern era.

frustration will reach a boiling point. Who could have known so many people, living as outliers in their own country, would turn to a New York, billionaire playboy to serve as an avatar as their frustration?

While *White Trash* is a history lesson, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Crisis in Culture* is a portrait. *Hillbilly Elegy* puts a human face on the American rural poor and offers a glimpse into the daily life of the dirt poor in Appalachia. Author J.D. Vance's memoir is a telling account of the 40-year decline of the white working class in rural America. Vance was born with a rope around his neck⁴² because of the socio-economic status of his family. *Elegy* recounts, with passion and humor, the travails of growing up in the midwestern Rust Belt, which has been in a 40-year economic decline. Vance was able to rise beyond the rural poverty to which he was born, eventually moving graduating from an Ivy League school and then working in Silicon Valley. *Hillbilly Elegy* recounts many of Vance's close family members who were not able to escape the poverty, abuse, alcoholism that is so prevalent in many rural communities. *Hillbilly Elegy* is an important book, especially in this American cultural moment. There is an incredible divide between rural and urban people and their values. Vance's memoir offers a sympathetic glimpse into the plight of a people who are often neglected or misunderstood.

There are several good books that offer the weight of statistical research to the discussion about rural poverty. In *Those Who Work and Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality and Family in Rural America*, Jenifer Sherman combines the power of narrative

⁴² J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 8.

with hard data. To do research for the book, Sherman moves to northern California to live in a small town that has been devastated by a decline in forestry, which was once the most prominent driver of the local economy. The reason for the decline is a controversial state government policy, that protects an endangered owl.⁴³ The logging industry was devastated and Sherman was able to effectively document the decades long slow motion devastation to the local economy.

Her thesis is that poor, rural Americans tend to have a division in their personal and public morality. The moral sensibilities of rural people lean towards strict conservatism, valuing independence and respectability. But their lifestyles, according to Sherman, do not bear that out.⁴⁴ In Sherman's account, there was animosity from everyone in the town about the federal government, even those who receive benefits. According to the townsfolk, drugs are a scourge on society, but most everyone uses. Religion is important, but few actually go to church. Using both qualitative and quantitative data to support her thesis, Sherman offers an insightful portrayal of the contradictions between morality and lifestyle in rural America.

The American Way of Poverty is perhaps the most far-reaching account of the poor in the United States written in the past 20 years. Author Sasha Abramsky traverses the country and spends time in pockets of poverty throughout the nation. Like most books on American poverty, the inner-cities get a lot of attention. But Abramsky shines a light on the poverty in the outskirts of American life as he tells true stories of hardship and

⁴³ Jennifer Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 31.

⁴⁴ Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't*, 11.

poverty from rural areas. *The American Way of Poverty* has a very developed understanding of poverty; one that it is not simply resourced based. Rather, poverty means that poor people are excluded from the regular norms of American life. Having a few extra bucks to buy new clothes, get a cup of coffee and enjoy basic civic engagement are luxuries taken for granted by most Americans. But the poor, especially the rural poor, “...share an existential loneliness, a sense of being shut out of the most basic rituals of society”.⁴⁵ Abramsky rightly notes how the causes and effects of poverty are inter-related. Those who are disengaged from vital relationships are more likely to be poor and stay poor.

Abramsky’s portrayal of poverty rings true. While many contend that poverty is simply the result of a failure to redistribute wealth or enjoy opportunity, *The American Way of Poverty* delves deeper into the roots of poverty. Loneliness among the poor, a self-perpetuating problem which often begets more isolation, is a key factor in the lifestyle of poverty. Poverty is a lonely exile that “pushes people to the psychological and physical margins of society.”⁴⁶ Abramsky notes the diversity of poverty in a way that other authors ignore. While many are generationally poor, some have moved down the social ladder, especially after the 2008 economic crash. The author notes how every time the American bubble of prosperity expands and then pops, several are never able to recover. An unfortunate number dip below the poverty line and create a cycle that makes it difficult for subsequent generations to rise. Despite the hardships, many among the American poor

⁴⁵ Sasha Abramsky, *The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives* (New York: Nation Books, 2013), 4.

⁴⁶ Abramsky, *The American Way of Poverty*, 5.

do not intend to stay impoverished. They have a resilience and a hopefulness that helps many “ensure that their futures look brighter than their pasts.”⁴⁷

While the stories and statistics in *The American Way of Poverty* are both accurate and heart-wrenching, the solutions to poverty offered by the author are dated and predictable: funding, funding, funding. The second part of *The American Way of Poverty* outlines a proposal to ease the poor in America that is purely resourced based. A beautiful first half is diminished by tired tropes about some having way too much in the second half the book. While a good tax policy is always ripe for debate, poverty is not going to be fixed by redistributing resources. Poverty is not just a math problem, it is a lack of vital relationships. While Abramsky correctly sees the problem of poverty as a lack of positive social engagement, his solution leaves the reader wanting.

Singlewide: Chasing the American Dream in a Rural Trailer Park by Cornell sociologist Sonya Salamon is a comprehensive study of the effects of life in a mobile home community. Salamon's thesis is built around something that most people intuitively know: domestic space shapes values, morality and behavior. For a brief moment in American history, owning a manufactured home (i.e. trailer) was a step towards a better economic life; a starter home for low income people. But today, living in a trailer tends to be the end of the home ownership road. Those who reside in mobile home parks may be reaching for a better life, but Salamon concludes, “an owned mobile home on rented land in a rural trailer park offers working poor families at best a downscaled version of the

⁴⁷ Sasha Abramsky, *The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives* (New York: Nation Books, 2013), 6.

housing dream.”⁴⁸ More often, rural people who reside in mobile homes are subject to the “galvanized ghetto” of the trailer park.

Salamon’s most compelling piece of research in *Singlewide* concerns the children who grow up in mobile home parks. There are over 5 million children who reside in trailer parks in America and Salamon’s team wanted to find long term effects of growing up in that sort of space. Her research concluded that growing up in a trailer park is not necessarily a deterrent to a good and flourishing life. Children who are raised in this environment often have parents who want a better life for their kids and are trying to provide opportunity. The difference for kids in a trailer park is access and engagement in social activities with neighbors and peers. In order to socially thrive and advance, a person needs connections to friends, neighbors, churches and civic groups, among other networks. Trailer parks are not necessarily devoid of such social activity and, as Salmon’s research has shown, parents who engage their children in community resources are more likely to see them thrive. The research reveals that there are fewer opportunities for social engagement in a rural setting and more of a likelihood that the trailer park will house some bad influences. Yet kids in mobile home parks can have upward social mobility as long as there are ample opportunity for community engagement.⁴⁹

Conclusion

As evidenced in this section of the thesis-project, there are several resources that speak to the concern of the poor. The books on development from a Christian perspective

⁴⁸ Sonya Salamon, *Singlewide: Chasing the American Dream in a Rural Trailer Park* (Cornell University Press. Kindle Edition, 2017), Kindle Location 215.

⁴⁹ Salamon, *Singlewide*, Kindle Location 204.

offer both philosophical and practical guides. Resources for the local church are plentiful as well. In the past two decades in particular, materials for the local church have emerged that offer a deep but accessible resource for local congregations who want to engage the local poor in meaningful ways. Further still, research, academic studies and biographies about the American rural poor have become very popular in recent years, especially since the election of Donald Trump. These have helped explain the vast difference in culture and morality between rural and urban people.

Though these resources are helpful, none are focused on the specific context of Poplar Ridge Friends Church and their attempt to reach the physically and spiritually broken among the rural poor. Someone looking to start a food pantry, panel on racial reconciliation or some other form of urban community development from a Christian perspective would have a bevy of resources and precedent to follow. However, for those seeking to do similar work in a rural context, there are few resources. The compilation of resources listed in this section of the thesis-project has proven useful to understand the complexities of both poverty and rural life. While no one text, paper or book speaks directly to the project at Poplar Ridge, ideas pulled from various voices have provided a solid philosophical and academic grounding for this project. As evangelicals continue to work towards community development, one hopes that their efforts will spread into the rustic, forgotten parts of rural America.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT DESIGN

Is there a “solution” to poverty? This question that has plagued every society for millennia. The short answer is “no,” because there are no metrics to determine the exact moment that someone rises from poverty. As discussed at length in this thesis-project, poverty is much more complicated than a lack of material resources or income. One can live well below the economic poverty line and enjoy a full, meaningful life. On the other hand, those who are wealthy can endure a misery of poor emotional and spiritual health, living without meaning. There are stacks of data that include metrics about income, quality of life, health care and accessibility to food. But statistical analysis cannot account for the inward condition of the individual. Poverty is relational; a lack of fruitful relationship with God, self, others and creation. These relationships are cultivated (or not cultivated) through personal and decisions from each individual and therefore cannot be measured with any precision.

This thesis-project is not an attempt to alleviate poverty. To pretend that the inequality in our community that has been cultivated by a plethora of contributors over generations can be alleviated by a well-meaning church is an idealistic fool’s errand. Yet we have determined to fight the good fight and beat back against the rising tide of isolation and drug abuse in our community. This means committing ourselves to long-term, gradual change in specific individuals who are willing to engage in the programs we offer. This section will describe the thesis-project at Poplar Ridge Friends Church, which took place between June 2017 through May 2018. I will describe our intentional effort to help economically broken people in our community form better relationships by

disrupting the processes that have led to poor lifestyle choices. I will describe the outreach projects that laid the groundwork for the Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery. Finally, I will outline the method of data collection for the thesis-project.

Disrupting the Process of Poverty

To combat poverty in a meaningful way, it is necessary to give ample attention to the processes that create poverty rather than just the desired end result. The poverty we observe in our area of rural Randolph county was created by individuals being subject to a generations-long processes of poor choices, family and cultural dynamics and an entrenched sense of shame and hopelessness. There is not a single reason for poverty and there will never be a singular solution. The processes of that leads to an impoverished life has been created and sustained over generations, and therefore could take generations to reverse. To combat poverty, our church is attempting to help the economically broken by providing an opportunity to change their lifestyle, habits and relationships that create and enable poverty.

As we consider the processes that create and sustain poverty, consider this scenario: a twenty-something, low skilled high school drop out has a history of petty drug-related crimes. He lives in a mobile home park 20 miles from the nearest possibility of employment. When the economy is good, he can work 25-30 hours a week at minimum wage (if he can get a ride). He will be the first one laid off when things slow down. He has never met his father, his mother is on disability and her live-in boyfriend spends most of that check. They fight all the time. The car doesn't run but it doesn't

matter because he does not have money for gas. If he had a steady income, he would not know how to effectively manage his money in terms of budgeting, saving or investing.

This brief scenario offers a glimpse into the situations that plague our community. With no where to turn, no solid friendships and no real opportunity, it is easy to see how one could sink into depression, malaise or turn to drugs. These types of scenarios are all-too-common in our community and, as we have observed, they can create a culture of poverty that reciprocates to the next generation.

Poplar Ridge is attempting to offer resources to disrupt this cycle by offering community and recovery. To combat isolation, we created the Free Community Meal, which offers the opportunity for new, healthy relationships. To build connections, folks in rural poverty need to be introduced to a new community.

For those who are caught in drug addiction, stuck in a cycle of self-destructive abuse, we are offering a faith-based recovery program called Celebrate Recovery. This program provides support and encouragement that is not otherwise available to addicts in our area. The addicts in our community are living in a destructive process: there are few healthy social networks, recovery programs or strong family structures. Poplar Ridge is seeking to disrupt this process by actively engaging in the lives of local addicts and revealing a different, more hopeful way of life.

Many conventional church programs are not designed to aid the impoverished. The drug addict living in a rural food desert¹ is going to have little interest in a

¹ Food deserts are defined as parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers. <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>

Wednesday night Beth Moore Bible study. Vacation Bible school and Upward sports, by and large, appeal to church kids and church families. A super-cool, emergent “contemporary/modern” church with a selfie booth and fog machine is likely not going to have a message that speaks into the life of the poor. That’s not to say these ministries are not worthwhile and fruitful. But many of the ministries that churches craft to attract people do little to address the destructive processes that create and sustain poverty. Potlucks, BBQ fundraisers and ice cream socials are part and parcel of a church calendar. But in order to stay relevant and meet present needs, congregations need to shape their ministries around real problems. Otherwise, congregations can be guilty of stuffing the saints rather than feeding the poor.

What follows is an account of the projects undertaken by Poplar Ridge Friends Church in an effort to bring restoration to individuals through creating community and offering a faith-based recovery program. Poplar Ridge is seeking to meet the needs in our community and address the harsh realities in our area. There is no quantifiable measurement for this sort of ministry, but we can observe the effects these programs are having on a select number of participants.

Laying the Foundation for Community Outreach

Creating and sustaining two ambitious ministries requires a great deal of leg work. It is hard enough to get Christians to come to church in an age of Netflix, Facebook and inexpensive weekend getaways. Creating a weekly opportunity for community and drug-recovery in an area renown for poverty, isolation and fierce independence is a

gargantuan task. Building a base of participation for these ministries began long before our opening night in June 2017.

In March 2016, fifteen months before we would begin the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery at Poplar Ridge, I asked the congregation if anyone had a heart for ministry to our local community. If so, I invited them to a lunch and brainstorming session after church. The seventeen people who gathered would become the base of volunteers for our outreach activities. After we broke bread and spent time in prayer, I asked the group to begin brainstorming about ways we could reach into our local area. This was new territory for everyone in the room. Poplar Ridge is a program-oriented church, which means we craft excellent activities in the hope that people will come to us and hear the gospel. We began thinking about ways we could pivot our ministries toward an outward focus.

A Guiding Philosophy: Know, Trust, Love

To guide the discussion, I introduced a concept that would point our ministries in an intentional direction. The ultimate goal of any outreach strategy should be *love*. We wanted to show our community that we love them in Christ and we wanted that love to be reciprocated. But, I explained, love does not happen at first sight. It takes time to develop a mutual love between church and community. Before love, you need *trust*. That is, there should be a well-established relationship whereby both parties (church and community) feel comfortable in relationship. For example, if we began a set of ministries with the sole intention of boosting our church attendance, that would not create a trusting relationship. Unchurched members of our community would (correctly) assume that our ministries

were the means to an end. Our group discussed creating relationships built on trust, and that can only happen over time. Trust would be created when our church offers meaningful programs and then follows through on those promises. As you will see, the church crafted several outreach ministries over the course of several months that created trust in the community.

But even before trust can be established, there must be a basic introduction. You have to *know* someone before you can trust them and, in time, trust can lead to love. The initial efforts were designed to simply meet our community. We determined to do activities in our area with the sole intention of meeting our neighbors. These initial ministries would be completely one-sided, with all the resources, volunteers and activity coming from the church. We envisioned a time when members of our community, especially those suffering in economic brokenness, would develop trust and (eventually) love for our church. This simple notion, Know-Trust-Love, provided a long-term vision and guided the discussion for our outreach ministries.

Meeting Our Community

Our church introduced ourselves to the community, specifically the Mountain View Mobile Home Park in June 2016. The first project was a cookout in a large grass field that sits in the middle of the park. To drum up interest in the cookout, we went door-to-door to each of the 96 trailers to hand-deliver a personal invitation to each resident. This gave us a chance to meet our neighbors and give a face-to-face the invitation. Some of the folks we met on that first outing have become close friends and participants in the Community Meal and/or Celebrate Recovery.

We had five teams of two who agreed to knock on doors a week before the cookout. They were admittedly nervous. I was too. After all, we were going into a trailer park with a long, well-earned reputation for trouble. Would we be greeted kindly? Would people answer the door? Was this safe?

As we gathered, we talked about some of the scenarios we could encounter. Most folks these days (in any community) get nervous with an unexpected knock on the door. I advised knocking on the door just a few times, taking a couple of steps back and putting a goofy smile on their faces. And, whatever you do I said, do not go inside the house. Those on the door-to-door team knew the risks associated with knocking on the doors and they were excited but cautious.

Along with safety concerns, what would we do if someone asked for prayer or, more importantly, had questions about God? We talked about ways to gently but honestly share the gospel of Christ. The message does not need to be a full sermon or a fiery oration. They committed to share God's love as clearly as possible in that moment.

On a hot June day, one week before the scheduled cookout, ten bold Christians knocked on doors of complete strangers in a mostly forgotten trailer park. The response was mixed. Most people were polite and courteous, if brief. Many had no idea where the church was, even though they had certainly passed it on the way to town. Some were irritated because an unexpected knock on the door meant they had to corral their barking dogs, turn down the TV and meet a complete stranger.

Several of the residents were frustrated because they had church people knock on the door before. When we introduced ourselves from a local church, more than a few

said, “we don’t want any,” in reference to the message of salvation. A steady stream of well-meaning believers had knocked on these screen doors in the recent past. This community had heard the gospel message, received the tracts and got invitations to church. Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons had frequented the park through the years. When we came to meet our neighbors, many assumed we were giving a generic invitation to Christ. Thanks, they said, but no thanks.

The invitation to a cookout with no strings attached was a welcome change. Many were very grateful for the attention and happy we chose to have the cookout in their mobile home park, rather than the church. This gave the residents a sense that this cookout was not a “bait-and-switch”; as if we were saying, we’ll give you food, but you have to come to church. Again, the intention of this effort was to simply meet our neighbors and build from there.

When it came time for the cookout we set up in the field as promised. It was the hottest day of the summer and we were all sweating bullets, wondering if anyone would show up. To our delight, around 100 people came to the cookout that evening. We met more new people than we could count and many said they had no idea they had so many neighbors! To add to our joy, 15 kids from the mobile home park came to our Vacation Bible school program that summer, offering us the opportunity to get to know them and their parents or grandparents. With this simple project, we were able to reach into our community and establish a good relationship.

We continued getting to know our community with other ministries through the year. We did another “back-to-school” cookout in the mobile home park and offered

school supplies and haircuts. That was a big hit. In the fall, we gave out pumpkins at Halloween and turkeys at Thanksgiving. In the Spring, we continued our efforts by offering each home the opportunity to have their own vegetable garden. We would supply the seeds and till the ground if they so desired. Several homes took us up on the offer! We gave out Easter Hams on Holy Saturday along with several sides and a desert. During these months, a few of our initial team were able to form friendships with a few people in the mobile home park. People began to call us for one reason or another. The caretaker of the park let me know about a depressed resident, who had her living space overwhelmed by the feces of the five pets she kept. We cleaned it up for her and developed a good friendship. I made hospital visits when I heard residents were sick or having surgery. In a moment that still gives me pause, I felt compelled to visit a few of the homes of folks I had come to know and offer communion. I read scripture, we broke bread and prayed together. Trust was forming between Poplar Ridge and our community.

In February of 2017, during another outreach meeting, we were sharing about some of the inroads we were making in our community. It was a very encouraging time, but we still felt there was work to do. I pitched the idea of a weekly meal at the church that could act as a space for people to get to know one another. We all agreed it was a good idea, but there were many reservations about the logistics and details. Would we have enough volunteers? How would we pay for this project? When would we begin? Who would lead this project? Would people come? Big questions, indeed.

From Isolation to Community - The Free Community Meal

Despite our reservations, we felt compelled to spend the next few months preparing to start this great task. I gathered people who expressed an interest in helping with the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery (more about that later). Among these leaders, I cast the vision for the Free Community Meal: we would host a meal for the purpose of making connections and forming relationships. This meal was not to be about feeding starving people. Again, poverty in our area does not mean people are going without food, clothing or shelter. The poverty that surrounds our church is a result of poor relationships. The meal is a means to a greater end. By breaking bread every Thursday night, we would come to know the names, faces and personality of our community. We would share in conversation, laugh and enjoy one another's company. This was not to be an "us giving to them" ministry. Rather, it is a "community" meal where we share a table with our neighbors.

We created a few guidelines. I encouraged church members to come and eat and intentionally sit with people they did not know from our community. What's the point of having a "community" meal if you're only going to sit with your church friends? We would serve the meal from tables in the front of our fellowship hall and not through the window separating the dining hall from the kitchen. This created an immediate connection with the people serving and the people eating. Finally, as soon as possible, we want people from our community serving, preparing and (if possible) providing the Thursday night meals. This would serve to dissolve any line between "us and them."

Paying for the meals was the elephant in the room. We had no idea how many people would actually come and eat or how much it would cost to feed them. The missions committee at Poplar Ridge agreed to provide \$1200 for the Free Community Meal. These funds were an answer to prayer and our leadership team was very grateful. But that money would only last for about 8 weeks. To quote Andrew the disciple, “how far will that go among so many?”² Faith is a tricky thing. If you know what is going to happen (like where the money is going to come from and how all this is going to work) then it does not really take any faith. The leadership team at the Community Meal put their trust in God to provide. And He did.

In June 2017, after months of prayer, preparation and nail-biting, the Free Community Meal began. We welcomed 25 people from our community to a hot dog dinner in our fellowship hall. Each person who came was someone we had met during one of our previous outreach ministries. The volunteers were ecstatic; we were fulfilling a dream! Over the summer months, the number grew to approximately 70 each week. The meal was thriving. Each week people would trickle into the Fellowship Hall at Poplar Ridge and sit down for a meal. During the initial meals, the room was quiet. But as the weeks progressed and people got to know each other, the crowds livened up. People began sitting at the same tables with the same people. Relationships were forming! And just as our money was dwindling, a wealthy member of our community heard about the need for financing the meal. Without much prompting, he donated enough to keep the meal going for the 18 months. God provided!

² John 6:9

Hope Dealers - Celebrate Recovery

The Free Community Meal project was designed with a very specific goal: to build community in our isolated area. The other problem we seek to address is drug addiction. The opioid epidemic, which continues to sprawl across America, has its claws in our rural community. Every person we have encountered in our ministries has been affected by drugs. Either they are addicted, have been an addict or their friends and neighbors have succumbed to the beast. We began a Celebrate Recovery ministry at Poplar Ridge to fight the scourge of drug addiction in our community.

Celebrate Recovery is a faith based, Christ-centered recovery program designed to guide people towards a better life through discipleship. The program is not just for drug abusers or those with a specific addiction like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. Rather, Celebrate Recovery is for anyone with a “hurt, hangup or habit.” Those struggling with grief, pornography, guilt, depression or any other number of non-drug related issues.

The format of Celebrate Recovery gatherings are similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. The first hour includes either a teaching time (usually on a Biblical theme related to recovery) or a testimony from someone who is recovering. Unlike secular recovery programs, Celebrate Recovery includes times for worship in song, prayer and scripture reading. There are 12 steps in the Celebrate Recovery model that are similar to Alcoholic’s Anonymous. However, the Celebrate Recovery steps are based on the Beatitudes of Jesus.³

³ Matthew 5:1-12

The second hour of Celebrate Recovery is a time for small groups to gather for discussion and accountability. The groups are always segregated among the sexes and, ideally, gathered by “hurt, habit or hangup”. Drug addicts would sit with other addicts, victims of abuse would gather together, those struggling with PTSD would find a room, and so on. There are some resources and leading questions to guide the small group discussion, but it is mostly an open-air conversation that allows participants to speak freely. Confidentiality is a must and everyone affirms that Celebrate Recovery is not a professional counseling or medical resource. The program is a Bible-based resource to grow in Christ and recover from bondage of any sort.

The vision for a Celebrate Recovery program at Poplar Ridge came from a couple at our church who had dealt with the terrible effects of drug abuse. Mark and Tammy had been married for 15 years and both had struggled with some form of dependency. Mark used drugs from an early age and Tammy had become co-dependent in her relationship with him. Both devout Christians and loving people, their marriage was falling apart due to their unhealthy lifestyle and relationship. In the Spring of 2015, they hit a breaking point. Despite his best efforts, Mark had relapsed and spent their last dollar on pills. Tammy was done.

That same week our church hosted the men from Teen Challenge-Greensboro in our worship service. Teen Challenge is a Christian based, residential drug-recovery ministry for men of all ages, with locations across America.⁴ Approximately 20 men came to sing and offer testimonies in our worship. It was either conviction of the Holy

⁴ www.teenchallengeusa.com

Spirit, or the fact he was getting kicked out of his house, but Mark felt compelled to go to Teen Challenge. With financial help from the church, Mark began a seven-month stay in Teen Challenge.

During his time, Mark embraced the rigor of the Teen Challenge program. The day had a strict routine which included physical labor, chapel and Bible study. Those first few weeks were very difficult as he was unable to see his family, detoxing and surrounded by people he did not know. Teen Challenge requires group therapy sessions so residents have a space to open up about their addictions. The first weeks were mentally, spiritually and physically exhausting for Mark, as he was forced to confront the inner demons that led him to his destructive lifestyle. As he confronted his addiction, a fresh vision began to stir in his heart. In recovery, Mark began to see how a faith-based program could work in our community. Mark felt a call on his life to help others begin recovery from addiction.

Other things began to turn around while Mark was in recovery at Teen Challenge. I was honored to officiate a vow-renewal ceremony as Mark and Tammy recommitted their life together in a ceremony in the Teen Challenge chapel. In February 2016, after seven long months, Mark shot out of Teen Challenge like a cannon, ready to get to work helping others recover.

In the Spring of 2017, with a flurry of outreach ministries already underway, Mark, Tammy and I began to plan for a weekly Celebrate Recovery at Poplar Ridge. We ordered the Celebrate Recovery leaders guide, a resource with nearly 400 pages of useful information and help to get started. Celebrate Recovery has a well-established, user

friendly template that has been duplicated in over 35,000 churches all over the world.⁵

The resources offer invaluable insight regarding structure, volunteer recruitment and training. Our task was to find willing participants, train them and implement the program.

We decided to coordinate the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery on the same nights. Both ministries would meet once a week (Thursdays) and complement one another. We surmised that people coming to eat may stay for recovery and people looking for recovery would feel more welcome with a meal beforehand. From February to May, Mark and I gathered a core team and began to train volunteers.

Both ministries began on the same Thursday night in June 2017. About 10 of the people who came to the meal stayed for the inaugural Celebrate Recovery meeting at Poplar Ridge. That small group of people would become the core of this ministry, attending each week almost without fail.

Having a Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery in our rural area has been an adventure, to be sure. We have been introduced to an interesting cast of characters who come with problems far different than many life-long church goers. But they have brought a genuine and welcome passion for the faith. A few of the volunteers who helped start the programs have since stepped away to pursue other interests in ministry. Some people are very passionate at the outset of a new program, but move on with time. That is a natural part of any programming, especially with a volunteer army. After the turnover in volunteers, we settled into a solid base of leadership that continues to serve faithfully.

⁵ <https://www.celebraterecovery.com/about/history-of-cr>

Research Methods

To gather information about the effects of the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery, I conducted semi-structured interviews with regular participants and look for common themes. As aforementioned, several folks have attended either/both the meal and/or recovery program almost every week since their inception. A tight-knit group of regulars have coalesced and made the Thursday night ministries a regular part of their routine. Attendance at the meal has fluctuated through the year and, as typical with drug-rehabilitation programs, Celebrate Recovery has seen a lot of turnover in participants. However, through the ebb and flow of attendees, a core group has remained consistent. I approached ten specific individuals who have been consistent throughout the year for an interview and sought their honest feedback about the Free Community Meal and/or Celebrate Recovery and how these ministries impacted their lives.

The questions for these interviews are simple, straight-forward and allow the participant ample opportunity to express their thoughts. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, which offered an opportunity to look for similar themes throughout the conversations. These folks have rubbed elbows in community for almost a year, leading and their shared experiences are useful research for this thesis-project. I found several common threads that run through the course of the interviews.

A semi-structured interview seeking qualitative data, rather than a survey seeking quantitative data, is a better means of assessment for this type of thesis-project for two reasons. First, the benefits of this type of thesis-project cannot be measured quantitatively. Surveys relating to drug recovery can be useful with a large sample

population. However, for the small-scale of this project, a formal survey will likely not reveal the most meaningful data about drug-recovery. Even those in our program who have stayed clean for many months would never check a box that says “recovered.” Recovery is a process and, as such, it is hard to measure using typical data-collection methods, especially at this early stage at Poplar Ridge. The same holds true with the Free Community Meal. The purpose of the meal is to create community and friendships in an otherwise isolated population. A survey will not accurately reveal how many friendships have been nurture nor their effects on the meal-goers. These are results that are best told in story, which is why I will ask the interviewees open-ended questions to expound on their newfound relationships. Second, as a practical matter, many of the folks who have participated in these ministries lack a high-school education. They may not feel comfortable with a survey or any other data collection that requires writing.

The interviewees will be selected based on their length of participation and consistency in these programs. The participant who has been attending regularly over the past year will be approached for an interview over one who is a relative newcomer. This is not a judgement on the newer participant. Rather, more time in the program offers a better opportunity for assessment of its effects.

CHAPTER FIVE: OUTCOMES

This thesis-project is the implementation and observation of a Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery at Poplar Ridge Friends Church from June 2017 through May 2018. Both programs meet weekly (Thursday nights) and enjoy a solid base of participation. Our rural location offers an insight into rural poverty, isolation and recovery for those who live in the margins. In the Spring of 2018, I approached 10 individual participants of either/or the Free Community Meal and/or Celebrate Recovery and asked for an interview about their experience in these ministries. These conversations would be recorded, transcribed and used as the tool for evaluation in this thesis-project. Each person agreed wholeheartedly and offered honest insight about their experience in these ministries.

The 10 people interviewed varied in age, gender and circumstances. They deal with issues ranging from financial poverty, drug addiction, depression, post-traumatic stress and codependency; some dealing with more than one issue. The themes that emerged during the interviews are very similar and I do not believe it is necessary to personalize each individual story. Rather, I want to highlight the common themes throughout the interviews. To my pleasant surprise, each person interviewed gave similar testimonies about the positive impact of these ministries.

The Community Meal - Common Themes

When asked about the Free Community Meal, the interviewees commented on three features of the ministries: the friendly setting, emerging friendships and gratitude for not having to provide food in their own home one night a week.

The first common theme revealed in the interviews is the vibrant, even raucous atmosphere during the Thursday night meal. When Poplar Ridge decided to open our doors and offer the Free Community Meal once a week, we made a commitment to build relationships with our neighbors. We wanted this meal to be an opportunity to meet our community, especially those who are less fortunate. However this would not be, to use the common parlance, a handout. This is not about the wealthy Christians on the hill tossing food down to our poor neighbors. Instead, we want to mingle, break bread and otherwise befriend anyone who walks in the door. We committed to learn names and sit beside those who come to the meal. Eventually, we imagined those who come to the meal would take ownership and begin preparing and serving the food. We wanted to have a very friendly environment for the meal, where folks felt immediately welcome.

Within a few weeks of beginning the Free Community Meal, people began showing up about 30 minutes before the scheduled start time to grab their seat and greet people as they trickle into the Fellowship Hall. By 5:30pm, the room is full and I have to quiet everyone down to say the blessing over the meal! The kids, who eat quickly, tend to gather together at a table or two and play games (and cut up!). They are usually chastised five or six times a night for running around the room! Despite the shenanigans from the kids, the practice of having dinner as a family has been beneficial. One interviewee commented that they tend to have supper at their dinner table at home since they started attending the Free Community Meal.

The adults have just as much fun. Throughout the night, there are bursts of laughter from different tables. People loudly greet (and playfully tease) one another from

across the room. Stories are shared about the difficulties of the week, trouble at work, family concerns and any number of other topics. The warm, friendly environment makes for a safe, comfortable place to simply gather and share. This simple treat has become, as one interviewee said, “the best part of my week.”

The second common theme gathered from the interviews is gratitude for the financial help provided by the Free Community Meal. Most of the people who gather for the meal are either elderly or, more likely, have several children in their home to feed. The Free Community Meal has become a staple activity, part because it eases their household grocery expenses. Each of the interviewees commented on how they have come to rely on the meal for their Thursday night dinner.

When we do the math, this meal adds up to a significant amount per family. The average cost to feed a family at home is approximately \$2 per person. A family of five who comes to the Free Community Meal four times will save \$40. That’s a significant amount of money for a family struggling to make ends meet. One person commented that the meal is the closest thing they ever get to going to a restaurant for a nice dinner. Many of us can afford to take our families out to a restaurant, even if its because we do not have the energy to cook and clean up! But this is a luxury that is not afforded to many in our community. The interviews revealed a deep gratitude for the financial savings the meal offers.

The third common theme gathered during the interviews regarding the Free Community Meal is the emerging friendships. Dinner table conversation may seem like a small thing to those of us who enjoy a thick social fabric and polite society. But almost

none of these folks had any friends or strong connections prior to gathering for the meal. That is not exaggeration. Every person interviewed revealed they did not know anyone in their community prior to the meal, even though they may have lived just a few trailers apart. Now they know that they will be missed if they do not show up for the meal. One person commented that they do not want to miss the meal because they do not want to answer all the calls and texts regarding their absence!

The participants told stories, sometimes with tears in their eyes, of their newfound friendships. Every person noted how they have made new friends as a direct result of the meal. At the meal, I encourage people to “eat then greet”; that is, as they are enjoying the meal, make an intentional effort to meet someone new. This simple act has led to incredible connections. Some have been living in the same trailer park for nearly a decade, just a few doors from one another, and had never met. Formerly strangers, now they call to check on each other, ride to the store together and spend time with one another throughout the week. Several commented that they feel safer in their own homes. They text, share encouraging Bible verses and pray for each other. Again, this may not seem like a big deal to those who enjoy meaningful friendships. But for someone who rarely leaves their 12’x40’ trailer, a good friend is worth their weight in gold.

One interviewee recounted how one of their children caught a virus and had to be home from school for a few days. Usually, this would mean the parent would miss work and the valuable income. But she was able to leave her child in the care of a neighbor she met and befriended over several months at the Free Community Meal.

One young man who attends the meal befriended an older neighbor in the trailer park. As they got to know each other, he realized she needed some basic plumbing and electrical work done on her mobile home. Before he became an addict, he was a handyman. In their interviews, both recounted how grateful they were for the other. One because she got the help she needed when she had no one else to call; the other because he found joy in using his skill to help a new friend. Both had a renewed sense of meaning in their life. This basic connection would likely not have happened without the Free Community Meal.

Several of the interviewees recounted the same story. One of the more frail and fragile participants in the Free Community Meal caught a very bad case of pneumonia in the spring of 2018. On the floor of her trailer and short of breath, she called a neighbor in the trailer park she met at the Free Community Meal. The friend rushed over and, after a quick evaluation, called an ambulance. While they waited, word got around to others. By the time they were loading her onto the ambulance, she had a yard full of people wishing her well and offering prayers. One person followed the ambulance to the hospital and stayed with her the night.

It is impossible to calculate the value of these friendships. Their worth is not easily measured. It is hard to imagine a life without meaningful connections. And yet, that is what many people in our community were living without. That has started to change. With each passing week, we are seeing stronger connections between former strangers. This is encouraging because the only way to combat isolation is with genuine,

meaningful and lasting friendships. The simple act of breaking bread, a communal activity if there ever was one, has created an opportunity for priceless friendship

Celebrate Recovery - Common Themes

Those who spoke in the interviews regarding Celebrate Recovery also revealed several common themes: a restored life, family restoration and accountability.

The most prominent theme gathered in the interviews was that people are seeing their lives restored in Celebrate Recovery. Those interviewed are dealing with a variety of “hurts, hangups and habits.” In each case, participants noted a marked change in their behavior and outlook on life. The brokenness that once dominated their lives is being replaced by a gospel-inspired restoration.

Each person spoke of lifestyle changes they have implemented since beginning Celebrate Recovery. The program offers a variety of tools to utilize when feeling the urge to succumb to their burdens. These include a weekly focus on one of the 12 themes in Celebrate Recovery. The participants are given a familiar prayer to say each week, in addition to study materials to guide the recovery. Misery tends to be self-perpetuating. Without strong family, friendships or community, people can enter an unending spiral of misery. Celebrate Recovery helps the participant imagine a better life, free of their hurt, hangup or habit.

You can literally see the evidence of restoration in the faithful participants of Celebrate Recovery. Opioid addiction devastates the physical body. As the desire for drugs increases, the addict will neglect their diet, hygiene and begin to scratch, and eventually pick, at their face and arms. Teeth are blackened before they fall out. But for

some of the folks who attend Celebrate Recovery, we have seen a marked change in their overall health. People are putting on weight, their complexion is brighter, they stand up taller and speak with more pride.

One person was suicidal before attending Celebrate Recovery. He admits that the program has not offered a medical prognosis for his post-traumatic stress. Rather, he receives the inward, spiritual care that neither prescription medicines or secular therapy can provide. The community of support offered each week allows for a time to vent frustrations, work through their emotional wounds in a healthy way and encourage each other that things can get better.

A second prevailing theme throughout the interviews with Celebrate Recovery participants is family restoration. Each person cited a stronger home life as a direct result of Celebrate Recovery. No one becomes an addict or maintains a hurt, hangup or habit by themselves. They have family or people close to them who create the problem and/or enable the addiction. The homes of Celebrate Recovery participants are tense places, rife with conflict and discord. However, some of that is beginning to change. Each of the interviewees said their life at home has changed for the better.

During Celebrate Recovery, participants gather in small groups to vent about their problems and encourage one another. It is in these intimate settings that people are learning they are not alone in their problems. Everyone has issues at home at one time or another. This commiseration has led to a new perspective for folks in Celebrate Recovery. They share ideas and advice on things like defusing arguments and raising children. It is invaluable help to people with very few resources to navigate the nuances and challenges

of home life. As aforementioned, some families are sitting down to dinner for the first time. Others are creating spaces for friendship and relaxation, all of which encourages a stronger home life and makes the recovery process that much easier.

Another important facet of the restoration of the home is the Celebration Place ministry that runs alongside Celebrate Recovery. Celebration Place is the program for the children of those with parents in Celebrate Recovery. Every Thursday brings approximately 15 children of parents who are recovering from a hurt, hangup or habit. The kids play group games, snack and (most importantly) learn from carefully designed curriculum that gives the kids techniques to deal with the stress of their home life. Each week, the kids are encouraged to name their feelings and talk about things that have made them emotional through the week. It has led to some very meaningful conversations among the kids in Celebration Place. Fortunately, the kids are taking the lessons to heart. Their behavior is improving at home, which further aids the recovery for parents.

Finally, the third common theme through the interviews is accountability. Every person who regularly attends Celebrate Recovery has someone to call when they are feeling tempted. The small community in the program at Poplar Ridge makes for an intimate, tight-knit group that welcomes any person regardless of their previous mistakes. This accountability manifests itself in two ways: small groups and sponsor relationships.

Celebrate Recovery is split into two sections each night. “Big group” is an hour long worship time where everyone gathers for a session similar to a Sunday morning service. There is music, greeting, prayers and a message that includes either a teaching time or a personal testimony from someone who is recovering. Following worship,

everyone is invited to the next section: “Small Group.” People are divided into smaller groups divided by gender; men in one room, women in the other. These small groups have become a safe place for people to share their deepest insecurities, shortcomings and failures. Again, no one in the Celebrate Recovery program had a safe place to share. During one interview, a participant shared how, at other state-mandated, secular programs he had attended, it was common to see drug deals in the parking lot after the meeting. Celebrate Recovery is faith based and, he delighted, “ain’t nobody going to deal in a church parking lot.” The Celebrate Recovery at Poplar Ridge does not have all the resources and bells and whistles of other programs, but there is a genuine and sincere desire to see people recover. This sense emanates from the close-knit small groups that meet each week.

A second way participants enjoy accountability is by sponsor relationships. These relationships begin informally, with calls and text messages through the week. With time, participants may enter into a “sponsor” relationship, whereby someone who is farther along in their recovery is linked with someone who is newer to the program. These two begin a deep and abiding friendship that allows for openness and honesty at all times. The sponsor begins to take on a responsibility to their sponsee and offer a constant flow of encouragement, exhortation and correction. The sponsee commits to consistent communication and reciprocation of honesty. For some in our program, these represent their first meaningful, lasting friendships. This level of in-depth, even intimate, friendship is helping people recover from a host of problems.

An Important Caveat

The response from the participants of the Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery are overwhelmingly positive. There were very few negative remarks about the programs from those who have participated. The interviews were positive and the participants were grateful for the ministries offered by Poplar Ridge.

There were some negative comments made as well, though not enough to denote a common thread. One person remarked about the menu, saying the food has been less than desirable on some Thursday nights. Another mentioned a squabble they had with another participant. Of course, any time you get people to rub elbows, there are going to be conflicts. That is just the nature of the beast. It is important that we do not portray these efforts as entirely positive, as though no one has any problems. Those interviewed are people who have persisted in the program. They started in the initial, exciting phase of the ministry and lasted through seasonal lulls with poor attendance and less energy surrounding the program. Many other people started this program and showed some potential, only to relapse. Over the year, a few people came to the Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery, but left immediately when they found out we did not give out money or offer blind charity. Several people have come and gone. The participants interviewed have engaged in a year of community and/or recovery programming. They represent the potential of these programs, but do not tell the full story.

The participants of these programs are the beneficiaries and their survey answers reflect their gratitude and positive outcomes. However, those who have served in these ministries have had to put in a lot of time, energy and emotional effort. It has not been

easy. Late night phone calls, time consuming service and the weight of sharing the burdens in our community have taken a toll. Had the scope of this project allowed, it would have been useful to interview volunteers to get their perspective on the benefits and drawbacks of these efforts. Some of these concerns are alluded to in Chapter 6: Recommendations.

Narrative

One particular individual typifies the benefits of Celebrate Recovery. To protect his identity, I will call him George. We met George at a community cookout and, with a gracious invitation, he brought his wife and children to the Free Community Meal to try it out. George did not look well. He had bloodshot eyes, a gangly, gaunt disposition and blackened teeth. George was addicted to heroin and meth and he was using every day, even with his kids in the home. His wife lobbed a number of empty threats to kick him out, but nothing ever changed.

George began to attend Celebrate Recovery and found a community unlike any he had known before. His previous drug-related convictions required state-mandated attendance at group therapy sessions. He would get high before the classes and buy more in the parking lot afterwards. But Celebrate Recovery was different. The program insisted that drug abuse is primarily a spiritual condition; the result of a broken relationship with God that can only be healed in Christ. Celebrate Recovery teaches that, without that primary relationship, all other areas of life will suffer.

To his credit, George invested himself fully in Celebrate Recovery. He attended each week and contributed to the group discussion. Like many addicts, the program

started with a lot of excitement and energy, which withers over time. Enthusiasm can start a recovery, but it will not sustain. You need more than energy and will power. The addict needs a safe community of people to foster the spiritual, inward restoration. George was clean for two months before a relapse. He was caught by his wife using heroin. They split up, and he went to live with his mother in a nearby part of the county.

To their surprise, the leaders at Celebrate Recovery did not give up on George or his family. They pursued him with godly compassion and, a few weeks later he admitted his relapse to the small group. After recommitting himself to recovery for several weeks, George surrendered his life to Christ in my office at church and was baptized the next month. At the time of this writing, he has been cleaner over seven months. He has put on 50 pounds, participates more in his family life, attends worship and got a job with a contractor he met at Sunday morning worship.

Due to his prior drug use, George's gums had been damaged, a common problem among drug addicts. His teeth became black and his gums infected with blisters and abscesses. This meant he could not work regularly without missing days due to sickness or discomfort. The strides George was making happened to be the topic of conversation around a table at the Free Community Meal one Thursday night. One person told another and another. Eventually, word got around to some generous members of our church who agreed to pay for his dental surgery and dentures. Today, he enjoys a full time job and a bright smile that reflects the inward restoration he found in Christ.

Conclusion

The data collected from the interviews reveals an overall and overwhelming positive effect on the participants. Every person interviewed expressed gratitude for the programs and noted a positive change in their life due to their regular participation. Many expressed a pleasant surprise in being welcomed in a church at all. Some had been shunned by congregations because they felt churches were too exclusive. Others never considered going to church because of the way they looked; they assumed their tattoos and missing teeth would not fit well with Sunday dresses and three-piece suits. The Thursday night ministry is disarming in the sense that it is more casual and does not carry the aura of a stiff Sunday morning service. The free meal, coupled with a group of volunteers who work tirelessly on behalf of addicts, sends a signal that our church is a genuine expression of God's love in Christ. Those interviewed expressed gratitude for being welcomed in a place (church) that has a reputation for moralizing cliques.

There is significant overlap among the common themes in the interviews. All of the benefits of this program are tied together. For instance, people are receiving tools and being equipped to overcome their addictions, but that requires the help of small groups and sponsors. Many of those who are in small groups met around a fold-up table in the church fellowship hall while breaking bread at the Free Community Meal. The kids in our community, many of whom have parents recovering from addictions are playing well together and building friendships. Their parents often talk and encourage one another in their parenting, thus strengthening the home. As physical health improves for participants

in Celebrate Recovery, they are able to work and earn more money. They are encouraged to spend wisely and save where possible, which leads to a greater financial grounding.

Before the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery, the process of life was predictable: try to keep your head above water until the next wave of struggle comes along. Many were caught in a downward spiral of misery. But these two programs have disrupted this predictable path and offers a better, restored life with a community of people who genuinely care. This, in my humble opinion, is the greatest work of the church; to go to those on the margins, the societal lepers of our day, and speak words of truth, care with the hands of Christ and minister in the Name above all Names.

CHAPTER SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

The Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery at Poplar Ridge have been a resounding benefit to the participants and to the church. The congregation has taken the enormous responsibility to provide a weekly meal and a recovery program for an ailing community. The response from the church has been encouraging and the benefits to individuals in our community is exciting. The church ought to be about Kingdom business; feeding the hungry, caring for the less fortunate and proclaiming the gospel to those on the margins. These efforts from Poplar Ridge have been fruitful and the interviews expressed an overwhelming gratitude for the work of this church.

I hope other rural congregations will begin to love their neighbors and take responsibility for their communities. The church is, for many rural areas, the only resource for support, counsel and community. Yet too many rural congregations become like their neighbors: isolated and fiercely independent. It is very difficult to get a congregation with an inward focus to begin to look outward into the community. Yet that is the call of Christ, who looked at the masses of people, “harassed and helpless” as they were and “he had compassion on them.”¹ The rural church must not look away from the poverty, isolation and drug abuse that plague our communities. Instead, these churches should act as an outpost, a light on a hill in a dim world, for rural peoples who have been marginalized and forgotten.

¹ Mark 6:34

Six Considerations

Should a church look outward and take on ministries as ambitious as Poplar Ridge, there are a few important considerations. Again, the interviews revealed an incredible gratitude for the Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery. Those interviewed see the end product of a lot of effort, preparation and tension. To use an analogy: a beautiful loaf of bread comes out of the oven brown, soft and ready to eat. But the end product is the culmination of mixing, kneading, patience and heat! The same is true with these programs. The final product is beautiful and fruitful, but it has taken enormous effort to create and maintain these programs. What follows are six recommendations based on my personal experience regarding outreach ministries in a rural community:

#1 - Expect resistance from church members

Poplar Ridge Friends Church is an incredibly welcoming and hospitable bunch. You feel it when you walk in the door. The vast (vast!) majority of our 200-member church has been very inviting to our neighbors. But it has been somewhat a shock to the system of the church to welcome people who are with such stark difference in socioeconomic status, mannerisms and work ethic (or lack thereof). When a long-time church member is used to sitting next to grandma and Ms Margaret for years and a drug addict plops down beside on the pew, it can be a jarring experience. While there has been no formal movement against the folks we have welcomed into our church, I have heard a few passive aggressive comments and whispers of frustration. Some have stepped away

from various roles they held for years citing “the direction of the church.” A few have left altogether.

This is, of course, a natural cycle for any church or organization that decides to change their focus. If we began to focus on outreach to upper-middle class soccer moms, I’m sure there would be a contingent of people who would not like the direction! Change is difficult and, in any organization, there will be turnover. And, to be sure, if someone has a problem with the poor, hungry and recovering addicts sitting on “their” pew, their problem is with God and not his local church. Many churches are not as welcoming and hospitable as Poplar Ridge and, should a pastor or leader decide to welcome in people who do not fit the mold, they should expect even more resistance than we have witnessed during this project.

#2 - Do not rush into these programs

It took us a lot of time and patience to develop a core group of people for these ministries. I believe a rural church needs (at least) a five year vision and strategy for reaching their community. Many people live in rural areas because they, consciously or subconsciously, want to be left alone. It is hard to draw people out of that shell. Our church has made a multifaceted effort to engage our community. This strategy (Know-Trust-Love) includes food giveaways, cookouts, service projects and other community engagement. We built a reputation over long months of one-sided service. Because of this effort, when we opened the doors for a meal and recovery program, people felt a previous connection and could come without suspicion. Had we just stuck some signs in our yard and put an add in the paper, I feel certain no one would have shown up.

Should a rural church feel compelled to serve their community, I would recommend having a long-term vision, but start small. Meet a few people at a time. Gain trust. Welcome people as honored guests and consider it a privilege when you become part of a life that is otherwise secluded and isolated.

#3 - Prepare for dubious requests

Once we started reaching into our community, some of the first people to respond were quick to make financial requests of the church. When word got around that we were offering food, some in our community began to ask for money to supposedly to buy gas, rent and pay utility bills. Fortunately, our church had a policy in place about giving money away. We have a fund and a committee to handle these requests. That committee was able to meet with those who were making the requests and determine their validity. Many were very suspect and we turned down several requests. Should a church engage the poor in their community, they need to have clear and firm guidelines regarding benevolence. Churches who give away blindly, without any screening, often end up doing more harm than good.

Once the initial wave of requests died down, we saw some people were genuinely engaged in our programs. They began to come regularly, enjoy the fellowship and see fruitful progress in their life. If churches can patiently endure the dubious initial requests, they will likely meet a group of very honest and genuine people look for positive change in their life.

#4 - These ministries are exhausting (in every sense of the word)

The work of the gospel is always energizing to the Spirit. I never get tired of seeing people who were once lost in drug addiction and seclusion find restoration. I see why the angels rejoice when even one sinner repents!² But even as the spirit is willing, our bodies are weak. These ministries are physically, emotionally, financially and spiritually exhausting.

Offering ministry for a group of people with few resources and no previous social networks means they are going to lean on the church. Which is what we want, but it does get tiring. Offering a free meal to the community is costly, as is designing the menu, shopping and coordinating volunteers. Churches need to have a plan in place to financially sustain the ministry. We spend approximately \$100 on food per week, which adds up quickly. This does not include expenses for paper products and advertising. We were fortunate to receive generous donations and then a grant from a local foundation. I recommend have a long term plan in place to pay for the meals. We also envisioned other local congregations participating in the meal. We have had some help, but local congregations have been slow to jump in.

The Celebrate Recovery leaders can get exhausted as well. They feel as though they are always on the clock and get calls almost every day. A few of the participants in the program started very strong, only to suddenly relapse. In one case, the church collected several hundred dollars to send someone to a residential rehabilitation program, only to see him drop out in a few short weeks. This takes an incredible emotional toll on

² Luke 15:7

volunteers who have been working with someone in recovery. We have been intentional about encouraging, training and rotating our leaders and volunteers in both programs. We never want too much burden to fall on any one person, so we are careful about dividing the responsibilities. Should a church attempt these ministries, they need to have a plan in place to share the load among a broad swath of volunteers.

#5 - These ministries require special volunteers

The Free Community Meal is sustained by people who have a heart for these ministries. When looking for people to lead, a few people accepted the responsibility and stuck with it through all these months. In my experience, this is rare. At the outset of new ministries, there is a buzz of excitement. You have more people to help than you need. Then, with time, there is an inevitable dip in excitement. A few people start shouldering more responsibility. We have had a few hiccups, including disagreements about the menu and volunteer coordination. Some volunteers do not want to continue when things get a little tricky. That is not what they signed up for. On the other hand, we have a set of volunteers who are willing to lean into the tension, work with one another and keep the meal going with a sweet spirit. Without the right set of volunteers who have a patient, agreeable personality and kind spirit, the meal would have folded long ago.

Excellent, committed leadership for Celebrate Recovery is essential. The couple (Mark and Tammy) who started this ministry at Poplar Ridge are just right for our program. Both are passionate, consistent and (most importantly) continuing in recovery. Like most in our church, I have never struggled with a destructive addiction that has been damaging in my life. But Mark and Tammy both have, which makes them exceptional at

leading Celebrate Recovery. They can cut through the lies and give an honest depiction of what it means to recover. They speak into the lives of the participants in a way that I cannot.

To have a successful and fruitful recovery ministry, I believe you need someone who has either been through the struggle of addiction or very close to someone who has fought this battle. Most of us are gullible concerning addiction. Many well-meaning Christians believe people can just bounce out of addiction with the right information and resources. It does not work like that. You need someone who has been to hell and back. If rural congregation wants to start a recovery ministry and there are no recovering addicts on board, I would strong recommend either helping an existing program or recruiting someone from outside to help. Well meaning (read: gullible) Christians can do more harm than good if they try to guide someone out of a place they have never been.

#6 - Consider the safety of the church

Jesus said to His followers, “be gentle as doves and shrewd as serpents.”³ Put another way, be open and generous, but do not be foolish. Sometimes people are isolated because they lack social connection and resources to liberate them from that lifestyle. And sometimes people are just bad. When we welcome the addicts and impoverished, we are opening the doors to a criminal element. Some of the people who have come to our church as a result of these ministries have spent time in prison on multiple occasions. We have talked at length about what to do in different scenarios, such as someone showing

³ Matthew 10:16

up strung out or if a parent who does not have custody wants to take a child home. It is scary stuff, but we must be realistic.

I strongly recommend have a safety team in place to help oversee any outreach ministry to addicts. We have a safety team on patrol every Thursday night who connects with volunteers via walkie talkie, locks doors and keeps an eye on things. The necessity of a safety team is a sad commentary on the state of our community, but Christians cannot be naïve about the real dangers to the church.

These ministries are difficult to maintain and require a lot of time, energy and coordination from a faithful few. However, the benefits greatly outweigh the burden. Meaningful ministry is only going to happen with struggle and sacrifice. I highly recommend churches, especially rural congregations, reach out to the impoverished and addicted in their community. But they should heed Our Lord's counsel when He says, "count the cost before you build."⁴

Conclusion

The Free Community Meal and Celebrate Recovery programs at Poplar Ridge have been an adventure. We welcomed a community of people that were wholly unfamiliar into programs never tried at Poplar Ridge. The process has been exhilarating, though trying at times. Two programs running side by side every week has infused much needed energy into our church. But it also has an exhausting effect. While we enjoy meeting new people and helping those lost in addiction, it has taken a monetary and emotional toll. We have learned to work together by coordinating logistics with a team of

⁴ Luke 14:28

volunteers. Each week is pieced together by folks who have full-time jobs and families to tend. Despite their commitments, they sacrifice their time and energy to build the kingdom on earth. It is humbling to see such grace in action.

Finally, these programs have helped Poplar Ridge appreciate its place in ministry. We are not a mega-church with lots of bells and whistles. Nor are we a small country church. Poplar Ridge is a rural church, with rural sensibilities and problems common in rural communities. We are small enough to know and love each other, but we are large enough to have the resources for ambitious outreach. I believe Poplar Ridge is doing the work to which we are called. We are meeting our community, meeting actual needs and seeking to fulfill the call of Christ to serve the vulnerable. Rural people are on the fray. There are few resources to help. The church can (and should) be the safe harbor for drifting rural communities. Two millennia ago Jesus, a small town Rabbi, preached good news to the rural poor. He welcomed those on the outskirts and reminded them of their place in the Kingdom. My prayer is that other rural congregations would come out of the shadows and, with grace and courage, engage their communities.

APPENDIX

Questions for semi-structured interviews:

1. How has your life changed since you started coming to either/or church, the Community Meal and/or Celebrate Recovery?
2. How has your social life changed since you started attending these ministries? Have you made new friends or met your neighbors?
3. If so, what are some of the examples of activity in your newfound friendships? Do you spend time together, help each other, etc?
4. What changes have you made in your life since starting Celebrate Recovery?
5. How is your family life different since you started Celebrate Recovery?
6. Is your outlook in life different than before?
7. Talk about your plans for the future.

Interviews dates

Participants names concealed to protect identity.

A - June 8th, 2018

B - June 8th, 2018

C - June 8th, 2018

D - June 11th, 2018

F - June 8th, 2018

G - June 8th, 2018

H - June 12th, 2018

I - June 7th, 2018

J - June 7th, 2018

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